

Customer Responses to Retail Environments: A Conceptual Framework Linking Store Experience, Satisfaction and Loyalty

Raja Nurmisha Wardina Raja Zulkapri^{1,4}, Abdul Salam Abdul Qodir Jilani² & Muhammad Faizal Kutip^{3*}

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40000 Shah Alam, Malaysia

⁴Decathlon Sdn Bhd, Bandar Sri Damansara, 52200 Kuala Lumpur

*Corresponding author: muhammadfaizal@uitm.edu.my

Received
16 March 2026

Revised
20 May 2025

Accepted
31 May 2025

Published
30 June 2025

ABSTRACT

Customer experience has become a defining factor in sports retail, making in-store engagement an essential area of study for understanding satisfaction and loyalty. This conceptual paper examines the role of multidimensional in-store experience- cognitive, affective, social, and physical- in shaping customer behavior, grounded in the “experience economy” perspective. Cognitive elements such as store layout and product information guide customer flow and decision-making, while affective factors like emotions triggered by design and service quality foster trust and excitement. Social interactions with staff and peers build community and belonging, while physical stimuli such as lighting, music and temperature enhance mood and extend dwell time. Together, these dimensions influence satisfaction, which reflects whether expectations are met or exceeded. Satisfied customers are more likely to return, recommend the store and develop emotional attachment, translating into loyalty behaviors. At the same time, challenges remain in sustaining satisfaction, as customer expectations continue to rise and experiential strategies must adapt to diverse needs. While satisfaction often mediates the relationship between experience and loyalty, prior studies suggest that experiential dimensions may also directly drive loyalty in competitive contexts. By integrating these perspectives, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding how sports retailers can optimize experiential strategies to stabilize satisfaction and strengthen long-term loyalty.

Keywords: *In-Store Experience, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, Sports Retail, Experience Economy*

How to Cite:

Raja Zulkapri, R. N. W., Abdul Qodir Jilani, A. S., & Kutip, M. F. (2026). Customer responses to retail environments: A conceptual framework linking store experience, satisfaction and loyalty. *The Asian Journal of Professional & Business Studies*, 7(1), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.61688/ajpbs.v7i1.521>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sports retail has become one of the most competitive industries in the modern marketplace, where the quality of in-store experience plays a decisive role in shaping customer satisfaction, loyalty, and the credibility of physical outlets. Consumers today evaluate retail environments not only on price and product quality but also on the stage, requiring retailers to deliver immersive, personalized, and engaging shopping journeys that differentiate them from online competitors (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Verhoef et al., 2009). To remain relevant in a digital-first economy, retailers are increasingly integrating technologies such as AI-driven personalization, interactive displays, and community-building activities (Danziger, 2018; Tiwari, 2019). When these experiential strategies fail to meet expectations, satisfaction declines, weakening loyalty and long-term brand commitment.

In-store experience is widely recognized as multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, affective, social, and physical elements that collectively shape customer perceptions and behaviors (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017; Happ et al., 2021). Cognitive aspects, such as store layout and product information, guide decision-making and reduce confusion; affective elements evoke emotions that foster trust and excitement; social interactions create belonging and community; while physical ambience enhances mood and extends dwell time. Together, these dimensions highlight that in-store experience is not merely functional but a strategic mechanism for influencing customer behavior.

However, despite the recognized importance of these multidimensional elements, many sports retailers struggle to synchronize these experiences into a cohesive strategy, leading to a "service-experience gap." While technology and aesthetics are often prioritized, there is a lack of empirical understanding regarding how specific dimensions, particularly the interplay between cognitive and affective elements, actually trigger long-term institutionalized loyalty in the Malaysian sports context. Without a clear framework to measure these nuances, retailers risk investing in superficial "spectacles" that fail to convert foot traffic into sustainable brand advocacy, leaving physical stores vulnerable to the continued dominance of e-commerce.

Accordingly, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that positions in-store experience as a driver of satisfaction and loyalty. Rather than focusing solely on product or price, the framework integrates experiential dimensions to explain how customer perceptions are restructured, satisfaction stabilized, and loyalty institutionalized. The objective is to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how in-store experience functions as a strategic mechanism in sports retail, offering insights into future empirical research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. In-Store Experience in Sports Retail

The in-store experience has been widely recognized as a critical determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty in sports retail. Scholars emphasize that customer experience extends beyond functional aspects of shopping, incorporating immersive design, sensory ambience, product trials, and social interaction to create memorable encounters (Happ et al., 2021; Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021). These elements not only enhance satisfaction but also encourage positive word-of-mouth recommendations, positioning the store as more than a transactional space. Increasingly, technological innovations such as mobile applications, intelligent kiosks, and interactive stations have been integrated to create "phygital" environments, where physical and digital touchpoints converge to enrich the customer journey (Bonfanti et al., 2023). This integration reflects the broader transformation of sports retail into experience-driven ecosystems, where sensory stimulation, human interaction, and digital innovation collectively define competitiveness.

Although scholars agree on the multidimensional nature of in-store experience, they differ in emphasis. Some highlight the importance of social benefits and employee interaction, suggesting that personalized assistance and staff engagement are central to satisfaction (Happ et al., 2021). Others emphasize technological innovations, arguing that phygital strategies enhance utilitarian and hedonic needs but risk reducing opportunities for social integration (Bonfanti et al., 2023). Still others focus on immersive design as a key driver of customer engagement (Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021). Despite these

insights, gaps remain in understanding the long-term impact of in-store experiences on loyalty and retention. Most studies concentrate on immediate outcomes such as satisfaction and recommendation, while overlooking challenges such as customer exclusion due to limited digital literacy. This suggests that future research should explore how balanced environments combining digital innovation with human interaction can sustain loyalty across diverse customer segments.

2.2. In-Store Experience Factors

The cognitive, affective, social, and physical aspects of the in-store experience are pivotal in shaping customer satisfaction and fostering loyalty in sports retail settings. Cognitive elements, such as store layout and product information, guide customer flow, reduce confusion, and help customers process information more effectively when making purchase decisions (Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021). Affective aspects capture the emotions elicited by design and service interactions, whereby positive atmospheres evoke excitement and trust, thereby strengthening satisfaction (Happ et al., 2021). Social dimensions emphasize staff interactions and peer engagement, which foster belonging and community within the store (Gentile et al., 2007; Moukrim & Gaber, 2024). Physical stimuli such as lighting, music and temperature further enhance mood, extend dwell time, and improve overall satisfaction (Ustazah et al., 2025). Collectively, these dimensions highlight the multidimensional character of in-store experience and its role in shaping customer behavior.

Recent studies also underscore the growing influence of technology in enriching these factors. Phygital integration, which combines physical and digital touchpoints, addresses utilitarian, hedonic, and social needs, creating more engaging shopping journeys (Bonfanti et al., 2023). Self-service technologies, such as mobile applications and intelligent kiosks, enhance cognitive and affective aspects but may reduce opportunities for social interaction (Gagné et al., 2022). Conversely, human relationships and staff engagement remain vital in enhancing satisfaction, suggesting that balanced strategies are required. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that specific layout components, such as verticalization and signage, serve as the strongest predictors of customer satisfaction in sports retail by improving product visibility and navigation (Zulkifli et al., 2025). Moreover, flagship-style retail environments often enhance the physical ambience and cognitive-emotional connections relative to conventional outlets, indicating that store type influences the relative weight of each dimension (Lourenco et al., 2025). While technological innovations enrich specific aspects of the customer journey, scholars caution that overreliance on digital tools may undermine social interaction, pointing to the need for integrated approaches that combine innovation with human engagement.

2.3. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction in sports retail is shaped by multiple factors, with service quality and the overall in-store experience consistently identified as decisive influences. Dimensions such as tangibles, reliability, and assurance are critical in determining whether customers feel their expectations have been met (Saricam, 2022). Satisfaction is not only an immediate outcome of positive experiences but also plays a mediating role between service quality and loyalty, reinforcing its central importance in consumer behavior (Yildiz & Duyan, 2019). Research further highlights that effective customer experience management, including human resource practices, product quality, and store design, strengthens satisfaction by creating environments that are both functional and emotionally engaging (Mohammadi et al., 2024; Happ et al., 2021). These findings suggest that satisfaction is multidimensional, encompassing both rational evaluations of service and emotional responses to the shopping environment.

Beyond these core dimensions, scholars have explored additional influences that shape satisfaction outcomes. Staff attitude, competence, and the range and quality of facilities have been emphasized as important contributors (Ampofo-Boateng, 2009). More recent studies highlight the growing role of technology, with innovations such as self-checkout systems and phygital experiences enhancing satisfaction by streamlining service and offering personalized engagement (Bonfanti et al., 2023; Ingale et al., 2024). However, gaps remain in understanding how brand equity and the integration of online and offline shopping channels contribute to satisfaction, particularly in the digital era. Future research should therefore investigate how evolving consumer preferences and hybrid shopping behaviors influence satisfaction, enabling sports retailers to adapt their strategies to strengthen customer relationships and build lasting loyalty.

2.4. Customer Loyalty

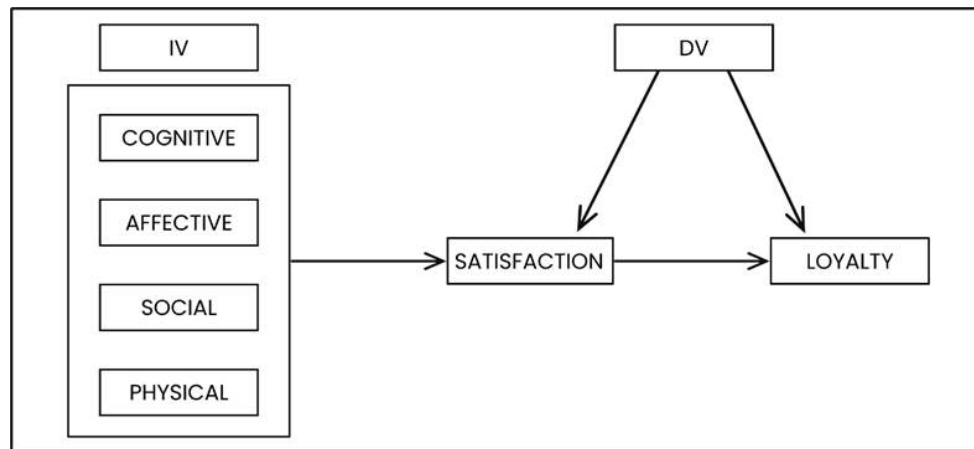
Customer loyalty in sports retail is a multidimensional construct shaped by service quality, customer satisfaction, brand equity, and effective relationship management. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that satisfaction is the cornerstone of loyalty, with high service quality and positive experiences serving as primary catalysts (Saricam, 2022; Le et al., 2025). Loyalty extends beyond repeat patronage to include emotional attachment and advocacy, where satisfied customers are more likely to recommend the store and maintain long-term commitment.

At the same time, scholars caution against the idea that service quality alone directly drives loyalty. While service quality influences satisfaction, its effect on loyalty is often indirect, mediated through customer perceptions and emotional responses (Saricam, 2022). Similarly, brand equity has been shown to exert a weaker influence on loyalty compared to satisfaction, suggesting that experiential and relational factors play a more decisive role (Leong et al., 2012). Psychological traits also contribute, with research indicating that loyalty to retail environments can be shaped by social affiliation needs and variety-seeking behavior, which vary according to customer switching tendencies (Ibrahim & Najjar, 2014).

These insights suggest that loyalty is not static but evolves through a combination of satisfaction, relational engagement, and psychological drivers. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to capture how loyalty develops over time, particularly in diverse retail contexts where digital integration and lifestyle branding increase consumer behavior.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1:
Conceptual Framework



The proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates the relationship between in-store experiential dimensions, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in sports retail. It posits that customer satisfaction is directly influenced by four experiential factors: cognitive, affective, social, and physical. Cognitive stimulation arises from store layout and product information, guiding decision-making and reducing confusion. Affective resonance is produced through emotions triggered by design and service quality, fostering trust and excitement. Social interaction emerges from staff engagement and peer connections, creating a sense of belonging and community. Physical ambience, including lighting, music and temperature, enhances mood and extends dwell time, reinforcing immersion in the retail environment. Together, these dimensions shape how customers perceive and emotionally respond to the store, thereby determining their satisfaction levels.

The framework suggests that satisfaction acts as a mediating outcome, translating positive experiences into loyalty behaviors such as repeat patronage, advocacy, and emotional attachment to the brand. In some contexts, however, experiential dimensions may also directly influence loyalty without satisfaction as a mediator, highlighting the complexity

of these relationships. By integrating cognitive, affective, social, and physical perspectives, this framework provides a structured approach to understanding how in-store experience functions as a strategic mechanism for building satisfaction and institutionalizing loyalty. Future empirical research can validate these relationships, offering insights for sports retailers to design experiential strategies that balance digital innovation with human interaction to sustain long-term customer commitment.

4. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper highlights the critical role of in-store experiential dimensions in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty within sports retail. Cognitive factors, such as store layout and product information, provide clarity and guide decision-making, whereas affective elements, such as emotions elicited by design and service quality, foster trust and excitement. Social interactions, including staff engagement and peer connections, create a sense of belonging and physical ambience, such as lighting, music, and temperature, which enhance immersion and extend dwell time. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that in-store experience is not merely functional but a strategic mechanism for influencing customer perceptions and behaviors.

By positioning satisfaction as a mediating construct, this paper explains how experiential dimensions translate into loyalty outcomes such as repeat patronage, advocacy, and emotional attachment to the brand. In certain contexts, experiential factors may also directly influence loyalty, underscoring the complexity of these relationships. For sports retailers, particularly in competitive markets, leveraging this framework can inform strategies that balance technological innovation with human interaction, thereby ensuring inclusivity and sustained engagement. Future studies should further explore these dynamics through empirical research, providing deeper insights into how in-store experiences evolve and contribute to long-term customer loyalty in retail sports.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to extend their heartfelt appreciation to the Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation (FSR), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam Campus, for their invaluable academic guidance, continuous support, and provision of essential resources throughout the development of this conceptual paper. Their encouragement and expertise have been instrumental in shaping the ideas and framework presented in this study.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in the paper.

9. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Raja Nurmisha Wardina Raja Zulkapri contributed to the conceptualization, research design, and writing of the original draft. He was also responsible for developing the theoretical framework and conducting the literature review.

Abdul Salam Abdul Qodir Jilani was responsible for data collection, methodology design, statistical analysis using SPSS, and validation of the results.

Muhammad Faizal Kutip contributed to the interpretation of findings and the preparation of tables and figures. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

10. ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Universiti Teknologi MARA and adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were informed about the purpose

of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process, and all data collected were anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. No personal identifying information was disclosed in any reports or publications resulting from this study.

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