



What role do visual branding elements play in driving consumer trust and purchase intent in both digital and physical marketplaces?

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ABSTRACT

This research looks at how consumers' trust and intent to purchase are influenced by the visual branding components across both online and physical retail environments. Color, logos, and human images, and even packaging, have been studied separately, but less research has been conducted on the combinations and differences between offline and online contexts of them. The study began to address this gap in the research by employing a mixed-methods study: qualitative data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with 5–6 participants to learn about participants' perceptions of branding, and quantifiable data were obtained from the survey of 50 respondents to assess evidence of consumer preferences. This analysis builds on some of the existing scholarship, such as Pelet and Papadopoulou (2012), who looked at how the color of a website can influence consumer mood, memorization, and intent to purchase, and Mogaji et al. (2019), who examined the placement of logos on products and the effect on perceived product quality. Zhang and Huang (2024), as well, showed the importance of using human images in the retail offline context, while Clement et al. (2025) stated that packaging design is a more holistic trust cue. The analysis showed that both color and logo clarity on the website are trusted cues regardless of the type of strategy used, particularly in a digital context, where impressions are visual, and impressions are typically the only means of assessment (van Rompay et al., 2021). In opposing spaces, physical packaging and environmental cues were identified as the most impactful, corroborated by Clement et al.'s (2025) findings regarding the efficacy of intentionally embedding packaging design cues across different products sold in physical environments. Ultimately, the study indicates that consumer trust and intent to purchase develop primarily from seeing multiple visual signals converge together, demonstrating the value of deploying a brand strategy that considers the context as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

From the spectacular golden arches of McDonald's to the minimalistic Apple products, the brand's visual elements instantly trigger emotional reactions and shape expectations. For example, color can affect brand awareness by up to 80%, and 62-90% of the initial impression of a product is formed in just 90 seconds, with most of this assessment being made up of the color palette (J. Gupta et al.).

Branding is a set of visual and semantic characteristics that enable a consumer to perceive a brand. Visual branding, sometimes referred to as brand visual identity, includes a logo, color scheme, typeface, composition, visual images, and other elements of a visual language. Strong emotions and an associative impression of the business are evoked by the colors, shapes, and design of the logo taken together.

Among the many similar offers, a vibrant visual design helps the brand stand out. The study of visual branding confirms that such elements effectively shift perceptions and purchase decisions.

In physical stores, consumers interact with packaging, texture, and spatial elements. In a digital environment, visual signals are limited to the screen: images, color, and composition. The gap between the offline and online experience — the "experience gap" — is a challenge that requires visually thoughtful compensation.



Visual content in social media significantly affects brand credibility through emotional and cognitive engagement of the audience. Logos also influence brand recognition, perception, attitude, image, purchase intent, and loyalty.

Despite significant investments in design and identity, it is still not clear enough exactly how individual visual elements (color, logo, minimalism, and stylistics) form trust and influence purchase intention in different sales channels. Most studies study these factors in isolation, without considering their combined impact and context (online vs offline). As a result, the question remains: which elements universally strengthen brand confidence, and which ones work only in certain conditions?

That is why there is a need to conduct research that will allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between visual branding and consumer perception. A research question follows from this: What role do visual branding elements play in driving consumer trust and purchase intent in both digital and physical marketplaces?

Understanding these processes is important for both businesses and marketers, as well as researchers. Companies will be able to build more accurate branding strategies, increase loyalty and conversion, and the academic community will be able to identify patterns of perception of visual signals in different market conditions.

AIMS

The main purpose of the study is to determine how the visual elements of a brand (color, logo, graphic style, minimalism, etc.) affect the level of consumer confidence and the intention to make a purchase in digital and physical retail spaces.

It is assumed that the visual elements of a brand (especially the color palette and logo design) play a more significant role in the digital environment than in the physical one, since the consumer is deprived of the opportunity to "touch" the product and relies on visual cues.

To achieve this goal, it is assumed that, firstly, to analyze existing research in the field of visual branding and consumer behavior in order to identify key approaches and theoretical foundations. Next, it is planned to identify the most significant visual elements that have a direct impact on the perception of the brand. Special attention will be paid to comparing the effects of these elements in an online and offline environment, which will allow us to identify both universal trust factors and specific ones for different contexts. The final stage will be an assessment of which visual characteristics of the brand most contribute to the formation of trust and purchase intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual branding is a primary technique in influencing consumer perceptions and choice, most importantly in a growingly competitive online and physical marketplace. Prior scholarship suggests that visual branding elements - specifically colour, logos, typeface, human interaction, and packaging - are non-verbal signals which alleviate uncertainty, establish a trust relationship, and ultimately create purchase intentions. Despite possibly being content in their branding efforts and investments in design and visual identity, the academic community has a muted

understanding of how visual branding elements interact in hybrid situations (in context), based on some studies examining single brand cues (colour or logo design), others studying complete configurations of branding strategies. The review that follows will attempt to clarify the position of visual branding in trust-building and the consumer decision-making process across online and offline contexts by synthesizing key prior evidence.

Color is probably the most commonly studied element in visual branding because the effects of color on us tend to be immediate and psychologically based. Pelet and Papadopoulou (2012) have conducted an experimental study that demonstrates how the colors of a website influence the mood of a consumer and also their level of memorisation and purchase intention, as mood mediates these three processes. Given that, van Rompay et al. (2021) studied persuasive colours in an e-commerce setting. The authors build on Pelet and Papadopoulou's initial conceptualisation and explore colour cues through cultural context to examine setting cues. The authors observe that blue typically suggests trustworthiness across cultures, while orange and red are associated with arousal/urgency, but its degree of effectiveness is usually dependent on the cultural background of the consumer.

These two studies suggest that color acts as a heuristic shortcut in online settings where consumers have no tactile experiences and where images primarily act as cues. While their findings clearly apply in an online setting, offline packaging studies (Clement et al., 2025) align with the logic of packaging images acting as visual cues to simplify categorization and help navigate consumers towards the best choice. Nonetheless, the literature indicates gaps: the vast majority dedicate attention to either an online or offline context without distinguishing when or how they are different, and always if the same colour effects can be generalised across channels as they have been validated in silos. This positioning offers a fertile area for visibility into cross-channel branding, exploiting the colour as heuristic contact (Snyder, 1981).

Logos are one of the key aspects of visual identity; they give both symbolic and functional information. Mogaji et al. (2019) found that proffering logos and brand marks affects beliefs related to product quality: logos placed higher on packaging or advertising outperformed logos placed lower, suggesting a greater perceived prestige, which subsequently increased purchase intention. Additionally, Donato et al. (2025) explored logo complexity, revealing a trade-off between the perception of clarity and luxury. Simpler logos were more easily recognized and communicated trust, whereas more complex logos allowed associations with exclusivity and prestige through repeated exposure.

These studies demonstrate that logos do not simply signal brand identity, but the logo's features provide semiotic cues that map to consumers' perceptions of quality and trust. It is noted that we know very little about how some logo placements and the complexities of logos interact with other aspects of the visual experience (as is the case with product packaging or digital interface layouts). Future work should examine logos embedded in a visual system rather than features isolated from the visual system.

Human imagery has proven to be a useful mechanism for establishing trust, particularly in online environments, where face-to-face interaction is absent, leading to increased uncertainty. Amnakmanee and Rattanawicha (2015) found that human faces and products were more

trusted and had a greater intention to purchase based on eye-tracking studies of e-commerce product representation. In a similar study of 1,500 product pages on Rakuten, Tang et al. (2025) found human images and videos increased satisfaction for four categories, including furniture. However, this was not the case with clothing and accessories when using too much human imagery, which led to negative effects, suggesting how human images and videos mattered less for particular products than others based on authenticity.

These research findings suggest that human imagery is a double-edged sword. Although social cues and human characteristics can humanize brands and manage risk perception, if the imagery is overused, it could lead to consumer skepticism towards the brand, including reduced attention to the product itself. Fortunately, offline studies maintain a similar effect. For example, Zhang and Huang (2024) found support for this theory in the context of fast-fashion retail stores, which provided human figures in their display, and increased intention to purchase. The challenge ahead is to determine the optimal uses and contexts for human imagery such that it successfully minimises trust and persuasion, without leading to oversaturation.

Packaging is a particularly important visual branding element in physical markets since consumers are interacting with spatially aware, material products directly. Clement et al. (2025) synthesized evidence from different studies and concluded that packaging attributes like color, text, images, and layout all work as implications (and heuristics) to communicate the level of quality. More importantly, design elements working together in an integrated way are more fruitful than separate reforms individually. Zhang and Huang (2024) also pointed to this point in their study of fast-fashion stores, noting that it was the combination of visual merchandising tactics (window displays, in-store shapes) used, rather than a single element, that influenced consumer purchase intention.

The clear similarity between packaging and digital "packshots" in e-commerce is noteworthy. High-quality user-generated images (Ma et al., 2018) serve similar roles as trust signals in online marketplaces, and are also often better signals than professional stock photos. Whether the audience is offline (through physical packaging), or online (with images of the product), consumers are relying on visual quality and consistency as trustworthy heuristics.

Throughout the literature, there is a common theme: individual visual cues seldom stand alone. Consumer trust and purchase intention arise from interactions and combinations of cues. Zhang and Huang (2024) in offline retail, and Tang et al. (2025) in e-commerce, note that no single visual element will result in purchase intent. Combinations of visuals will have a super-additive effect: a combination of colour, human imagery, logos, and a layout of visual cues together. This configurational logic is contrary to previous research solely emphasized single visual elements and highlights the need for models combining multiple visual cues at once.

Despite the prevalence of studies, there are certain gaps. First, there are very few studies that actually compare visually similar branding effects online and offline, and thus leave us in doubt as to what visual cues are shared across settings and what may differ in digital and physical ones. Second, while certain research indicates the risks of over-saturation—such as excessive use of human imagery or overly convoluted design—empirical testing of visual brand tipping points is lacking. Another shortcoming is in interaction effects between multiple elements: while

most studies manipulate color, logos, or packaging separately, such elements in reality co-appear as elements of holistic branding systems. Finally, although cultural variation is well established in the color domain of perception, considerably fewer observations exist concerning the impact of culture on reactions to logos, package design, or human imagery, and thus limit the generalizability of existing findings in global markets.

The existing literature has certainly demonstrated a strong association between visual brand elements and consumer trust and purchase intention. Color and logos act as universal heuristics and their emerging presence influences first impressions and perceptions of quality; human images relay social cues which reduce uncertainty; and packaging serves as both a decision shortcut and an indicator of trust. However, studies have also demonstrated that through brand recall, visual branding elements operate in a complex web of context, category, and cultural influences. Furthermore, while both contexts and their specific challenges provide marketers with many opportunities, the problem is magnified in online due to the fact that offline consumers use tactile and atmospheric cues while online consumers are reliant almost entirely on visual cues for their consumption experience. Therefore, to better understand and utilize visual branding elements, taking a comparative and integrative approach is crucial.

For practitioners, including business owners and marketers, the implications are that they require approaches to best utilize combinations and nesting of different visual elements in contextually appropriate and fit-for-purpose combinations and nesting. For researchers, the gaps in this area pave the way for a research agenda that includes globalization and hybridization of physical and digital marketplaces, impacts of saturation of these visually driven branding elements, and the implications of culture, context, and circumstance. Ultimately, examining how visual branding elements act both independently and in conjunction with each other is a first step to better understanding how the construction of trust occurs and how purchase intentions are formed in the current marketplace.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to investigate the ways in which visual branding elements (i.e., color, logo, imagery of people, and product packaging) affect consumer trust and purchase intentions in digital vs. physical environments. The reasoning was that visual branding would matter more in this digital context because, in a physical environment, consumers engage. After all, they were able to "touch" the physical environment. However, consumers rely solely on the visual branding elements.

The results largely substantiated this hypothesis. Color and logo design were particularly relevant factors in digital contexts, which supports Pelet and Papadopoulou's (2012) experimental context finding that color significantly alters consumer mood and memorization, and that persuasive color cues—especially blue—develop trust consistently found by van Rompay et al. (2021). Acceptable packaging and the extent to which the visual presentation/layout acts as trust cues in the retail context were the strongest cues in physical contexts, supporting Clement et al.'s (2025) synthesis of packaging attributes as trust heuristics and Zhang and Huang's (2024) evidence of integrated visual merchandising in a retail space. The study also showed that none of the cues presented or observed worked independently in these circumstances: trust and purchase intention arise from multiple cues interacting (Tang et

al., 2025) found evidence of a super-additive effect when brand elements are presented together in e-commerce / online retail.

The research was successful in fulfilling its goals: establishing the most beneficial visual cues and observing the impact of visual cues in a digital environment compared to offline. Their hypothesized role, that visual cues would be heightened in a digital environment, was supported; however, the research also established a considerable influence of context-specific cues, which contributed to trust, such as packaging in an offline context and minimalism in an online context. In this manner, the study was an extension of earlier work by Mogaji et al. (2019) and Donato et al. (2025). In the later work, the clarity of a logo and what it communicates regarding a brand is not only a factor by itself as a single cue, but it is among many other cues, to establish trust in an overall context of ambient branding cues.

In summary, visual branding is not a trivial consideration when marketing, but a substantive consideration for building consumer trust and guiding consumer behavior. For businesses, the message is simple: a successful branding strategy requires a coherent combination of visually cohesive elements that appropriately fit the marketplace context. For researchers, this study showed the importance of understanding the interaction of cues, from a geography (e.g., online versus offline), and provided an opportunity to expand previous lines of inquiry relating to culture, context, and submerged effects in hybrid contexts.

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