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# How Physical Stores Build Trust in Online-First Fashion Brands: A Qualitative Study of Mall Shoppers in Kerala

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**Abstract--** The Indian fashion landscape is rapidly changing as the online first fashion retailers are gaining influential position in the market by adding physical storefronts in the major malls across Kerala, yet the question of how these entry will be perceived by the customers and the literature stating the trust in this context is still in its infancy. The qualitative study will address this question and will explore whether adding a physical shop or kiosk will build trust among their customers or not. Through semi-structured interview with 25 mall shoppers across Kozhikode, Ernakulum, and Trivandrum, the study reveals that, opening a physical storefront is very important to build trust in the minds of people as it reduces the uncertainties and risk in the purchase through sensory validation, customer service interaction and perception of brand stability & credibility. The participants were purposively selected based on certain criteria's and thematic analysis has been done to organize the customer perceptions. The findings of the study extends trust theory in Omni-channel context and further the study suggest managerial implications for a strong customer-brand relationship in the emerging market context.

**Keywords--** Trust, Qualitative Research, Online first retailer, Omni-channel retailing, sensory validation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The retail landscape have transformed drastically with the emergence and growth of ecommerce platforms. Online retailing has enabled the vendors to reach all over the world without any hesitations and hurdles. Being online helped them operate on a low budget, limited stock, direct customer contact, convenience, and competitive pricing. However, there are shortfalls like product uncertainty, cart abandonment, lack of physical interaction, and sensory evaluation. To address these limitations, many retailers have opened physical stores in shopping malls and commercial streets to increase footfall into the shop. This transition gave rise to the click and brick business model, which can operate both online and offline providing better customer experience. The physical presence will enable the customers to interact with the products, touch and feel the materials, trial facility, comfort and fitting can be checked or even customizations are also made possible.

This will definitely increase the customer engagement with the brand and in turn it will create a sense of trust and shopping confidence among the people. Ultimately it will result in repeated purchases, revisits, and positive word of mouth.

In online shopping context, people often look at the customer reviews and writings before making a purchase to make sure whether it is trustworthy or not. The absence of physical or sensory experience creates perceived risk related to product, quality, brand, authenticity, return policies, and post purchase dissatisfaction. Starting a physical store could reduce this type of uncertainties and enhance brand image, brand visibility, authenticity, and trust among prospective customers. In the recent years shopping malls in Kerala have become a hub of Digital fashion brands who are online, first retailers operated through websites, apps and also social media pages. These brands have established physical stores to enhance customer experience, engagement, trust, and to build a brand image. Kumar et.al (2024) found this transition process as an "information effect" which means touching and feeling a product reduces the uncertainties about the quality and fit of a product, which creates a sense of confidence among the customers to purchase more. Understanding how the customers perceive this transition is very much important in this context and how they contribute to trust formation is therefore important. Kerala presents a compelling retail setting to examine this phenomena. The state is having a distinct consumer culture developed through increase the relatively higher per capita income and traditional value conscious purchase behaviour.

Kerala Mall shoppers are not just passive consumers. They search online and arrive with a formed opinion and will compare products through a sensorial investigation before making the actual purchase. Existing studies have given focus only to exclusive digital platforms or traditional platforms only. Understanding how this click and break and beyond create trust is this necessary as very little research has examined the digital or traditional platforms only. Understanding how this click and break and beyond create trust is this necessary as very little research has examine examined the trust dynamics.



The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative research among the customers to find out their actual experience.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Omni-Channel and Click and Brick Retailing.

Retailing has transformed from a single channel system to multichannel system and eventually to omnichannel retailing environment. Omnichannel retailing means integration of multiple shopping channels that allow the customer to purchase products seamlessly (Verhoef *et.al* 2015). The Sony channel retailing helps the retailers to provide consistent services across digital and physical platforms. Click and brick business is a form of omni channel retailing in which the business will operate both online and off-line. This will leverage the advantages of online as well as off-line environment while online platforms offer convenience, 24\*7 accessibility, payment and delivery options, remotely, physical store offers touch and feel, trailability, immediate ownership, and personal assistance (Piotrowicz and Cathbertson, 2014). Anh Nguyen, *et.al* (2022) finds that omni channel retailing is still in its infancy stage with maturity teams like consumer behaviour and customer engagement. Aregu Asmare *et.al* (2021) states that comparative studies across culture and qualitative studies are needed in the area. Fei Gao and Xuanming Su (2019) explains that physical stores in omni retailing are evolving in fulfilment Centre and physical showrooms are reviewed in the recent researches.

### 2.2. Trust In Retail Environment

Trust is widely us the major factor influencing consumer behaviour in all the retail context. Trust reduces the risk and enables the customer to purchase products with confidence (Gefen, Karahanna & Straub , 2003). In online platforms, trust is inevitable factor as the consumers cannot see and feel the products pre-purchase. The researches so far done in Ecommerce indicates that trust is influenced by several factors like quality of service, website ease of use, brand reputation, and transparency (Pavlou, 2003) . However, the intangibility creates uncertainty and perceived risk regarding product authenticity among the consumers. Thus, physical stores can play a magnificent role in trust building process by providing sensorial experience and quality service. The physical presence act as an assurance for the customer.

### 2.3 Experiential Retail And Customer Confidence.

The experiential factors are inevitable in fashion industry, as the consumers rely on tactile and visual cues while choosing a product.

The touch, feel, and a trial facility enable the people to purchase with the confidence, thereby reducing uncertainty and risk. Moreover, the sensory experience create satisfaction and better customer engagement. The physical store, Frnd will act as a facilitator which allow the customers to interact with the brand, engage with the product and staff, evaluate products, and thus end up with greater confidence in the brand and influence purchase decision (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Thus integration of channels will provide the retailers with the opportunity to combine digital advantages as well as physical experience, benefits by creating trust and customer engagement.

### 2.4 Research Gap

From the available literature, it is evident that the studies have been done in US, Europe and Australia. While some researchers have examined omni-channel retail in Asian market and substantial gap exist on an emerging country like India and how the role of physical retail act as a trust building mechanism, where is from nation to nation, region to region, and person to person. Existing studies, treat trust either as a construct or an Omni channel phenomenon in western context. The present study addresses both gap by investigating how Kerala consumers perceive this transition process and Kerala mall ecosystem.

### 2.5 Research Question

How do online fashion retailers build a trust by establishing physical store fronts in shopping malls across Kerala?

## III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted qualitative exploratory approach to gain insights on consumer's perception towards click and brick retail environment. The purpose of the study is to understand how trust is generated, experienced and articulated by more shoppers engaging with the click and brick fashion brands.

### 3.1 Sampling

Participants were chosen purposively from the three major shopping malls in Kerala: LuLu Kochi, Gokulam Mall in Kozhikode, and Mall of Travancore in Trivandrum. These three malls were selected to capture geographic diversity within Kerala.

#### 3.1.1 Criteria For Purposive Sampling

- 1 Customer must have purchased from an online first fashion brand in the previous month
- 2 Customer must have visited the store.
- 3 Customer must be willing to share their insight and experience without hesitation (voluntary participation)



The customers were selected until thematic saturation and resulted in a final sample of 25 comprise of 15 female and 10 male in the age group between 18 to 56 years. The occupational diversity of the respondents include students, engineers, IT, professionals, teachers, healthcare, staff, business owner, and also homemaker.

### 3.2 Data Collection

Semi structured in-depth interviews served as the medium of data collection. Interview was conducted in participants preferred language, Malayalam or English, and most of them opted for Malayalam. The audio recording permission was denied, hence the data were written and transcribed Verbatim with attention. Each interview took around 12 to 20 minutes. Participants received detailed information about the study purpose and they provided consent. Pseudonyms were given to mask the identity of the respondents.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The interview transcript were analyze using thematic analysis as per Braun & Clarke (2006,2019), six step reflexive process namely familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, review potential themes, defining and name themes, and produce the report.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four interconnected themes where emerged from the analysis, explaining how physical stores act as a trustee building mechanism in the click and brick retail context.

### *Theme 1: Sensory validation as trust foundation.*

The respondent stated that, with the establishment of these physical stores, they could better experience the fabric, comfort, colour and pattern rather than buying online without experiencing the product. Adding physical stores increase their trust in the brand as they could trial and purchase the product instantly, or in case of size mismatch, they can purchase the same online without any worries.

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#### *Supporting quotes*

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“The website or app shows the colour one way, but it may not be the same when it arrives by adding the store that confusion has over, now I could purchase from the store under this light and can understand the real shade. My designation is Blue is not Blue I have seen on my screen, I learned this only when I visited the store.” (R1)

“Now, when I see something on the souled store app, I think I have been to their Calicut store. I have touched their T-shirts, I know the sizing, the fear is less because the brand is not just a website anymore.” (R3).

“Trying the product in the store helps me understand its quality better” (R4,R6,R8,R9,R11,R14,R20)

“Touching the material makes me more confident about the brand” (R3,R5,R7,R9,R10, R21,R23)

“When I try the clothes in the store, I feel more satisfied with my purchase” (R12, R13, R14, R21,R22)

“In the store, I can check whether the product actually look like the same as online” (R17, R19)

“Physical interaction with the product gives me more assurance about the purchase” (R20, R22)

“Now I prefer to check the fabric and fitting before buying fashion product because some of the Instagram pages have made me fool by giving some other products” (R24)

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### *Theme 2: Reduction of perceived risk*

Physical stores often reduces the risk of product returns associated with online purchases. Participant told that they have faced the wrong product, colour mismatch, fabric issues while purchasing online and visiting the store made them physically verify the product they buy and can ensure quality in person.

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#### *Supporting quotes*

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“Physical stores, reduce my fear of getting poor quality items” (R5, R19, R21)

“I feel safe for buying products of the brands having a physical store” (R2, R9, R11, R15, R21)

“Buying directly from the brand has reduced, my product returns drastically” (R1, R3, R4, R7, R8, R12)

“The Store reduces the risk of post purchase disappointment” (R2, R6, R7, R9, R10, R11, R21, R23, R24)

“Seeing the product in person will reduce the uncertainty about the product I purchase online” (R18, R19)

“I always feel that having a product, physical store makes me feel that the brand is more reliable as many insta or Facebook pages may disappear after receiving bulk orders” (R25)

“Physical Store enables me to return the product if something goes wrong, that trust made me feel like the brand support their customer needs as well” (R17)

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*Theme 3: Customer Service Interaction*

This theme is rooted on the participants feel that the store staff create a relational trust by assisting us on purchase process, detailing about the product and material, and sometimes the respondent felt a sense of belonging to the brand through the staff intermediation. The store employees check their inventory online and tell us to order online. In case of the product size is not available in the store.

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*Supporting quotes*

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“Store staff help me understand the products better” (R1, R4, R7, R9, R11, R12).

“I always experience the staff suggestion that suit my needs, as well as my body type” (R5)

“Having someone to guide me in the Store increases my confidence in the brand” (R2, R6)

“Sometimes staff interaction make the shopping process easier and more enjoyable” (R19, R22)

“Customer service in the brand improves my shopping experience, and I feel engaged with the brand” (R3, R5, R6, R8, R10, R14, R16)

“When the employees are so cooperative and helpful, I feel more satisfied” (R17, R19, R20, R24)

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*Theme 4 Perceived Brand Authenticity*

Participants frequently associated the physical presence as a mode trustworthiness, reliability and authenticity. Physical stores, therefore, reinforce the perception of brand stability and credibility.

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*Supporting quotes*

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“If a brand has a store, then they will be more accountable, and I feel more genuine than the brands who operate on pages or website alone” (R1).

“Store presence make us feel the brand is more authentic” (R3, R7, R10, R13).

“Physical stores makes the brand seem more transparent” (R4, R8, R9, R11).

“Brand with stores in the mall feels more legitimate compared to the online only brand” (R18).

“Seeing the brand in a mall gives me the impression that it is trustworthy” (R20).

”Brand with a store is more professional and organized” (R22).

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The study was conducted to know, how the physical stores contribute to trust building of the online first fashion retailers in Kerala. The thematic analysis have revealed for key areas or themes through which the trust is developed among the customer. These findings contribute to the existing literature as well as the theory of trust in omni-channel retailing. The finding suggest that Store Enhance the credibility of the brand and this aligned with the observation of Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson (2014).

#### V. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

1. Customer service place a vital role in trust formation: hence staff training is essential to create better customer experience.
2. Adding stores in reputable location, tier 1 cities and in mega malls, enhance brand authenticity rather than establishing stores in a low footfall area.
3. Better sensory experience and ambience must be considered with prime importance as the store layout or design make the customers more engaged.
4. A complete online off-line integration is necessary as the price of the product, various from store and website pages

#### VI. CONCLUSION

The study finds that a physical store plays a crucial role in building brand trust among the customers and the study contribute to the existing literature. The finding suggest that a physical store is not just a sales point, it is their trust building environment by bridging the gap that an online only Store cannot provide. Adding Store fronts reduces the uncertainties associated with the product returns, trial facility, and better customer experience and brand authenticity. The online retailers who seek to build trust and customer loyalty can extend their business to a physical store without any hesitation. It will not only create sale, but also increase trust and loyal customers.

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