Exploring the emotional impact of in-store apparel experiences on Generation Z consumers

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Abstract. This study is set against the backdrop of the experience economy, focusing on the offline clothing consumption scenarios of Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2010). It explores the impact mechanism of multi-dimensional consumption experiences in physical stores on the arousal of positive emotions. Through a questionnaire survey, 270 valid samples were collected, and structural equation modeling was employed for analysis. The findings reveal that sensory experience (visual and tactile stimuli), Feeling experience (staff service and theme activities), interactive experience (fitting room interaction), and Related experience (sense of community belonging to the brand) significantly stimulate consumers' positive emotions. However, olfactory and auditory experiences (music, fragrance) and Thinking Experiences (reflection on slogans) did not reach a significant level of impact. The study uncovers the "pleasure-arousal-control" Feeling synergy effect in offline consumption, filling the gap in traditional impulse buying theories, which have not adequately addressed multi-sensory integrated experiences and the Feeling uniqueness of Generation Z. In practice, it is recommended that clothing physical retail businesses enhance Feeling value delivery through immersive visual displays, AR fitting technology, community-oriented operations, and personalized service design to meet Generation Z's deep-seated needs for instant gratification, social identity, and self-expression.

Keywords: Generation Z, impulse buying, clothing consumption experience, emotion-driven

1. Introduction

In the era of the experience economy, physical clothing stores are reshaping their core competitiveness through immersive scenarios, immediate consumption satisfaction, interactive participation, and entertaining experiences, in response to the impact of e-commerce and to meet the deep-seated needs of consumers, especially Generation Z. Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2010) is a new consumer force whose consumption behavior shows significant characteristics of segmentation, experience orientation, and Feeling drive: they pursue personalized products and services while also emphasizing social and Feeling satisfaction during the shopping process, such as immersive space design, the pleasure of immediate product acquisition, the sense of accomplishment from participating in product design, and entertainment experiences like sharing and check-ins. Studies show that these multi-dimensional consumption experiences can significantly stimulate consumers' positive emotions (such as surprise and pleasure), influencing their clothing consumption experience. However, existing studies have mainly focused on impulse buying mechanisms in online scenarios, with insufficient exploration of the correlation between offline clothing store experiences and consumer emotions, particularly addressing the differentiated needs of Generation Z. This study aims to analyze how the experiential elements (environment, interaction, service, etc.) of clothing retail stores influence the positive Feeling responses of Generation Z, with the goal of providing theoretical support and practical guidance for the optimization of in-store experiences and precise marketing, helping businesses achieve sustainable growth in the wave of the experience economy.

2. Theoretical basis and research hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical relationship between clothing store consumption experience and consumer emotions

In the context of the experience economy, physical clothing stores reconstruct the consumer decision-making process through environmental, immediacy, participation, and entertainment experiences. Environmental experience (such as lighting, music, and fragrances) directly affects consumer Feeling states through sensory stimulation [1]. Its aesthetic design and functional layout can

enhance pleasure and arousal. Immediacy experience, by eliminating waiting times, strengthens consumers' sense of control over the product [2] and reduces perceived decision-making risks. Participation experience, by increasing self-involvement, triggers a sense of accomplishment and identity recognition, meeting the demand for personalized expression among Generation Z. Entertainment experience (such as photo-worthy spots) activates consumers' desire for exploration and sharing through social interaction and gamification, leading to Feelingly driven impulse purchases [3].

Although existing studies reveal some relationships between consumption experience and emotions, there are still three limitations: first, most studies focus on online scenarios and lack systematic exploration of multisensory integrated experiences (such as fragrance and tactile interaction) in offline clothing stores; second, research on Generation Z tends to emphasize digital behavior [4], neglecting the uniqueness of their Feeling responses in offline consumption (such as self-compensating motivations); third, the Feeling mediating mechanism is often based on a single dimension and has not deeply analyzed the synergistic effects of "pleasure-arousal-control" and their differentiated impact on impulse buying intention and behavior.

2.2. Research hypotheses

Clothing is an experiential product, and full outfits and try-ons better showcase the value of clothing. Research on experiential marketing in clothing brand stores not only aligns with the sales characteristics of clothing [5] but also fits with the current trend of the experience economy. Liu Xinwei points out that providing consumers with immersive shopping experiences that have unique memorable elements can stimulate Feeling reactions, leading to impulse buying decisions [6]. Research by Li Zhi shows that experiential marketing can evoke strong Feeling responses from consumers, ultimately affecting impulse buying [7].

Consumption experience in clothing stores refers to the enhanced experience provided by the store throughout the process of consumer selection. Consumer Feeling changes reflect the effectiveness of experiential marketing. This study will analyze the impact of various experiential dimensions on emotions and propose the following hypotheses.

(1) Sensory Experience and Emotion

Sensory marketing uses objects in the environment to stimulate consumers' five senses, which then form sensations that influence their emotions. In visual stimulation, Holbrook and Hirschman's research points out that consumers are affected by factors such as lighting, color, and environmental atmosphere, which can produce different emotions. For example, a relaxed atmosphere can help consumers feel physically relaxed and mentally at ease [8]. Mattila and Wirtz suggest that background music can trigger Feeling responses, affecting consumers' in-store experience and purchase intentions. Smell is often used to create a distinctive store atmosphere, encouraging impulse purchases [9]. Hulten's study shows that scent is related to individual pleasure and happiness, influencing emotions and memory. In terms of touch, physically feeling the fabric in the store helps consumers better perceive the clothing's style and quality, thus stimulating Feeling responses toward the purchase [10].

(2) Feeling Experience and Emotion

A product or accessory in the store may evoke Feeling resonance with consumers, triggering strong emotions of wanting to experience it again. Feeling experience adds Feeling value to clothing, advertisements, or brands, enhancing the consumer's experience. Tan Zhu's research shows that Feeling experiences can resonate with female consumers during the consumption process, stimulating them to make impulse purchases. Bob Donath's research indicates that consumers are more willing to purchase products that provide Feeling experiences [11].

(3) Thinking Experience and Emotion

The purpose of Thinking Experience is to inspire deep thinking during consumption, leading to emotions such as satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. Huang Feixia's empirical study shows that tourists' Thinking Experiences in cultural districts can enhance their perceptions, ultimately generating positive emotions such as satisfaction and excitement. Wang Yuzhu's research indicates that consumers who lack a good rational experience during purchase are less likely to effectively perceive the content of their consumption and fail to trigger cognitive stimulation, resulting in negative Thinking Experiences that significantly lead to low-intensity negative emotions. These negative emotions mainly include feelings of helplessness, worry, and frustration [12].

(4) Action Experience and Emotion

Clothing consumers engage in activities like trying on clothes, mixing and matching, interacting, and taking photos in-store, which provide them with memorable action experiences. Huang Feixia's study shows that action experiences help tourists generate positive tourism consumption emotions [13].

(5) Related experience and Emotion

Related experience in clothing consumption involves connecting consumers with specific communities (such as professional groups, lifestyles, nationalities, or cultures) through clothing as a medium, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and Feeling value. Tang Xiaofei and other scholars, using the hotel industry as an example, studied how relationship investments made by businesses (consumer perceptions of the company's relationship investments, i.e., Related experiences) have a positive impact on consumer emotions [14].

Thus, based on the above discussion, this study proposes the following hypotheses for offline clothing stores as research samples:

H1: The consumption experience in clothing stores has a positive impact on consumers' positive emotions.

H1a: Sensory experience in clothing consumption has a positive impact on consumers' positive emotions.

H1b: Feeling experience in clothing consumption has a positive impact on consumers' positive emotions.

H1c: Thinking Experience in clothing consumption has a positive impact on consumers' positive emotions.
H1d: Action experience in clothing consumption has a positive impact on consumers' positive emotions.
H1e: Related experience in clothing consumption has a positive impact on consumers' positive emotions.

3. Research design

3.1. Data collection and sample characteristics

The survey on consumer impulse purchasing was conducted from August 8, 2024, to September 12, 2024. The questionnaire was distributed through a combination of online and offline methods. The in-person surveys ensured that respondents had just exited the store, which allowed for more accurate and vivid recollections of their experiences. The online survey was distributed via the Wenjuanxing platform, targeting Generation Z consumers. Respondents were required to meet the following criteria: they must be members of Generation Z, have independent purchasing power and awareness, have made an in-store purchase within the last six months, and their most recent in-store purchase should not have been a planned purchase.

To ensure the quality of the survey, a screening question was included in the middle of the questionnaire to filter out inaccurate responses. Additionally, questionnaires completed in less than 300 seconds were removed to improve data accuracy. A total of 356 questionnaires were collected, with 86 invalid surveys removed due to incomplete responses, incorrect answers to screening questions, or insufficient completion time, resulting in 270 valid responses. The valid response rate was 75.8%. The sample size meets the requirements proposed by Bentler and Chou. The questionnaire design can be found in the Appendix Table, and the reliability and validity of the questionnaire are shown in Table 1. The Cronbach's α for each dimension was above 0.6, indicating good internal reliability.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for variables in the questionnaire

Dimension	Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Standardized Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
	Sensory Experience	0.834	0.840	8
	Feeling experiences	0.781	0.780	5
Consumer Experience	Thinking Experience	0.712	0.708	5
	Action Experience	0.733	0.743	4
	Related Experience	0.892	0.893	6

3.1.1. Descriptive statistical analysis of the sample

Descriptive statistics of the sample were analyzed using SPSS software, and the demographic characteristics as well as the purchasing behavior statistics are shown in Table 2.

From Table 2, it is evident that more than 60% of the sample was female, with a gender ratio of approximately 6.5:3.5. Since the target consumers of this study are Generation Z, any questionnaires not falling within the 18-25 age range were considered invalid, resulting in over 90% of the respondents being between 18 and 25 years old. Due to age restrictions, the majority of respondents were students (55.56%), with 30.37% employed in enterprises. In terms of disposable monthly income, more than 30% of respondents had an income between 2001-5000 yuan, and only 32.22% had an income below 2000 yuan. This suggests that most Generation Z respondents have a certain level of disposable income. Additionally, 68.52% of the respondents made impulse clothing purchases within the price range of 100-500 yuan, indicating that impulse purchases typically occur within an affordable price range.

Table 2. Descriptive statistical analysis of the sample

Category	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	95	35.19	35.19
	Female	175	64.81	100.00
Age	Under 18	1	0.37	0.37
	18~25	269	99.63	100.00
Education Level	Middle School	1	0.37	0.37
	High School	8	2.96	3.33
	College	31	11.48	14.81

Table 2. Continued

	Undergraduate	221	81.85	96.67
	Master	9	3.33	100.00
Monthly Disposable Income	Below 2000	87	32.22	32.22
	2001~5000	97	35.93	68.15
	5001~8000	47	17.41	85.56
	8001~11000	21	7.78	93.33
	11000~15000	13	4.81	98.15
	15000~20000	2	0.74	98.89
	Above 20000	3	1.11	100.00
Occupation	Public Sector	15	5.56	5.56
	Corporate Employee	82	30.37	35.93
	Teacher	6	2.22	38.15
	Student	150	55.56	93.70
	Self-Employed	8	2.96	96.67
	Other	9	3.33	100.00
Price Range of Last Impulse Purchase	Below 100	13	4.81	4.81
	100~500	185	68.52	73.33
	501~999	53	19.63	92.96
	1000~5000	15	5.56	98.52
	5001~10000	2	0.74	99.26
	Above 10000	2	0.74	100.00
Was There a Companion During Last Impulse Purchase?	Yes	224	82.96	82.96
	No	46	17.04	100.00
Total		270	100.0	100.0

3.1.2. Descriptive statistical analysis of variables

The descriptive statistics for the dimensions of consumer experience and Feeling factors were analyzed using SPSS. The data distribution was checked for normality, and the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistical analysis of variables

Variable		Item	Sample Size	Minimum Value	Maximum Value	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Median	Skewness	Kurtosis
Consumer Experience	Sensory Experience	SE1	270	1.000	7.000	5.641	0.960	6.000	-1.535	4.616
		SE2	270	1.000	7.000	5.230	1.355	5.000	-0.541	-0.221
		SE3	270	1.000	7.000	5.374	1.224	5.000	-0.709	0.670
		SE4	270	1.000	7.000	4.726	1.276	5.000	-0.351	-0.263
		SE5	270	1.000	7.000	4.867	1.312	5.000	-0.308	-0.132
		SE6	270	1.000	7.000	3.504	1.717	4.000	0.191	-0.809
		SE7	270	1.000	7.000	5.489	1.079	6.000	-1.177	2.783
		SE8	270	1.000	7.000	5.178	1.298	5.000	-0.745	0.451
	Feeling experiences	FE1	270	1.000	7.000	4.211	1.539	4.000	-0.112	-0.678
		FE2	270	1.000	7.000	4.533	1.467	5.000	-0.336	-0.368
		FE3	270	1.000	7.000	4.796	1.448	5.000	-0.573	-0.015

Table 3. Continued

		270	1.000	7.000					
	FE4	270	1.000	7.000	4.622	1.568	5.000	-0.505	-0.407
	FE5	270	1.000	7.000	5.326	1.290	6.000	-0.679	0.115
Thinking Experience	TE1	270	1.000	7.000	4.800	1.558	5.000	-0.501	-0.516
	TE2	270	1.000	7.000	4.248	1.618	4.000	-0.190	-0.618
	TE3	270	1.000	7.000	4.870	1.492	5.000	-0.704	-0.055
	TE4	270	1.000	7.000	4.396	1.543	4.000	-0.293	-0.572
Action experience	AE1	270	1.000	7.000	4.681	1.894	5.000	-0.540	-0.928
	AE2	270	1.000	7.000	4.459	1.684	5.000	-0.319	-0.799
	AE3	270	1.000	7.000	5.059	1.362	5.000	-0.606	0.185
	AE4	270	1.000	7.000	5.078	1.505	5.000	-0.773	0.205
Related experience	RE1	270	1.000	7.000	4.293	1.540	4.000	-0.365	-0.354
	RE2	270	1.000	7.000	4.330	1.568	4.000	-0.273	-0.551
	RE3	270	1.000	7.000	4.144	1.662	4.000	-0.251	-0.755
	RE4	270	1.000	7.000	3.833	1.667	4.000	-0.087	-0.815
	RE5	270	1.000	7.000	4.959	1.407	5.000	-0.686	0.284
	RE6	270	1.000	7.000	4.156	1.658	4.000	-0.181	-0.784

According to Table 3, the absolute values of the kurtosis and skewness for the data in each dimension are within acceptable limits, indicating that although the sample data is not perfectly normal, it can be reasonably considered approximately normal and is suitable for further analysis.

4. Research results

The analysis primarily focused on the relationship between six types of consumer experiences and internal consumer factors, with the results shown in Table 4.

When examining the impact of visual and tactile experiences on positive emotions, the standardized path coefficient was 0.202, which is greater than 0, and this path showed significance at the 0.01 level ($CR = 3.557, p = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that visual and tactile experiences have a significant positive effect on positive emotions, confirming hypothesis H1a. Visual experiences, such as store decorations, can attract customers to enter and linger in the store, while the visual and tactile experiences provided by the store displays and clothing styles directly stimulate consumers and enhance their positive emotions during in-store shopping experiences.

When examining the impact of olfactory and auditory experiences on positive emotions, the path did not show significance ($CR = 0.560, p = 0.576 > 0.05$), indicating that olfactory and auditory experiences do not affect positive emotions, thus failing to support hypothesis H1f. Although olfactory and auditory experiences can enhance the overall shopping experience and improve consumer recognition of the brand or store, ensuring a good mood for customers, they are unlikely to directly promote positive emotions.

When examining the impact of Feeling experiences on positive emotions, the standardized path coefficient was 0.128, which is greater than 0, and this path showed significance at the 0.05 level ($CR = 2.318, p = 0.020 < 0.05$), indicating that Feeling experiences have a significant positive effect on positive emotions, confirming hypothesis H1b. Store staff, through providing gentle services, professional matching, and care suggestions, can stimulate positive emotions in consumers.

When examining the impact of Thinking Experiences on positive emotions, this path did not show significance ($CR = 1.780, p = 0.075 > 0.05$), indicating that Thinking Experiences do not affect positive emotions, thus failing to support hypothesis H1c. Thinking Experiences primarily involve consumers' thoughts about personal or societal issues, where consumers gain new insights. However, these insights do not translate into positive emotions during shopping.

When examining the impact of action experiences on positive emotions, the standardized path coefficient was 0.203, which is greater than 0, and this path showed significance at the 0.01 level ($CR = 3.706, p = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that action experiences have a significant positive effect on positive emotions, confirming hypothesis H1d. Action experiences mainly enhance consumer engagement with the brand, improving participation and triggering positive emotions, thereby extending the time customers spend in the store.

When examining the impact of related experiences on positive emotions, the standardized path coefficient was 0.117, which is greater than 0, and this path showed significance at the 0.05 level ($CR = 2.035, p = 0.042 < 0.05$), indicating that Related experiences have a significant positive impact on positive emotions, confirming hypothesis H6e. Clothing brands that focus on a

specific style or target group can better connect with consumers, motivating positive impulsive buying emotions by bridging the gap between consumers and their ideal self.

Table 4. Model path coefficients and significance

Path	Unstandardized Path Coefficient	SE	CR	p	Standardized Path Coefficient	Hypothesis Test
Sensory Experience →Positive motion	0.270	0.076	3.557	0.000	0.202	Accepted
Olfactory-Auditory Experience →Positive motion	0.030	0.054	0.560	0.576	0.030	Rejected
Feeling experiences →Positive motion	0.132	0.057	2.318	0.020	0.128	Accepted
Thinking Experience →Positive motion	0.091	0.051	1.780	0.075	0.097	Rejected
Action experience →Positive motion	0.175	0.047	3.706	0.000	0.203	Accepted
Related experience →Positive motion	0.110	0.054	2.035	0.042	0.117	Accepted

5. Conclusion

This study, based on offline clothing consumption scenarios, reveals the underlying mechanisms of multi-dimensional experiences and emotion-driven factors in the clothing retail store environment for Generation Z. The empirical results show that Sensory Experience (visual and tactile stimulation), Feeling Experience (store staff service and theme activities), Behavioral Experience (trying on clothes and interactive participation), and Related experience (brand community belongingness) can promote positive emotions in consumers, while the effects of Olfactory and Auditory Experience (music, fragrance) and Thinking Experience (slogans and display-driven reflection) did not reach significant levels. On a theoretical level, the study fills the gap in traditional impulse purchase models by addressing the lack of attention to offline multi-sensory integrated experiences and the unique Feeling traits of Generation Z. It deepens the theoretical explanation of the "pleasure-arousal-control" Feeling synergy effect. On a practical level, it is recommended that physical retail businesses enhance experience touchpoints and Feeling value through immersive visual displays, personalized service interactions, AR fitting technology, and community-based group operations. This approach precisely aligns with Generation Z's need for instant gratification, social recognition, and identity expression. The study is limited by an imbalanced gender ratio in the sample and the timeliness of data from the early stages of the pandemic. Future research could combine the application of metaverse technology and cross-cultural comparisons to further explore the enhancement effects of digital tools on offline experiences and the moderating path of negative emotions.

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Appendix

Appendix Table. Questionnaire design

Measurement Concept	Item	Content	Source
Sensory Experience	SE1	The clothing store environment is clean, and the displays make me feel comfortable	
	SE2	The store window display is distinctive and leaves a strong impression on me	
	SE3	The store's lighting makes me feel comfortable	
	SE4	The store's music makes me feel relaxed and happy	
	SE5	The store's scent makes me feel comfortable	
	SE6	The drinks provided by the store taste good	
	SE7	The fabric in the store feels comfortable to the touch	
	SE8	After close contact with the clothes, I gain a comprehensive understanding of the product	
Feeling experiences	FE1	The store evokes emotions in me that are different from other stores	
	FE2	The store as a whole gives me a sense of novelty	
	FE3	The store staff make me feel friendly, reliable, and knowledgeable	
	FE4	The store's theme activities stimulate my interest	
	FE5	The store's humanized design and thoughtful service provide me with a pleasant shopping experience	Schmitt (1999); Brakus (2009); Shengyong Guo (2010); Xinwei Liu (2011); Bo Ji (2019); Yilin Ou (2019)
Thinking Experience	TE1	Some of the store's displays make me stop and think	
	TE2	The store's slogans make me think	
	TE3	The overall style of the store evokes associations in me	
	TE4	The store's theme activities make me stop and think	
	TE5	Seeing clothes I like makes me imagine the scenarios where I would wear them	
Action experience	AE1	Whether or not I plan to buy, I am willing to try on clothes in the store	
	AE2	I enjoy participating in brand-hosted experience activities	
	AE3	Participating in the store's experience activities deepens my understanding of the clothing and brand	
	AE4	With guidance from the staff, I can easily find clothes and accessories that suit me	
Related experience	RE1	The brand gives me a sense of belonging	
	RE2	The brand reflects my values	
	RE3	The brand's positioning and reputation reflect my social status	
	RE4	The brand's clothing earns me more respect than before	
	RE5	The brand's clothing has somewhat shaped my image or persona	
	RE6	Through participating in store activities, I met many like-minded people	
Positive motion	PM1	The shopping experience in this store allows customers to gain more information (about the brand, store, and clothing)	
	PM2	The shopping experience in this store helps customers form positive normative evaluations	