RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the Interplay Between Global Brand Image and Store Design: An Expert Review and Thematic Analysis of Apple and LEGO Stores in China

Pingwei Gong¹, Mohd Shahrudin Abd Manana¹*, Norzalina binti Zainudin²

¹ *Department of Industrial Design, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia*

² *Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia;*

* Corresponding author: Mohd Shahrudin Abd Manana；am_shahrudin@upm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The rapidly evolving "New Retail" landscape is reshaping how global brands connect with consumers, yet the links between store design, hedonic value, and brand image remain underexplored. Existing studies often treat global brand identity and localized retail strategies separately, leaving a gap in understanding how physical stores can balance global consistency with local cultural resonance. To address this gap, this study examines the interplay between global brand image and localized store design, highlighting the mediating role of hedonic value to develop a conceptual framework. Twelve expert interviews were conducted with professionals in interior design, visual merchandising, marketing, and retail operations, and findings were triangulated with a literature-based conceptual framework. Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, five key themes emerged: (1) Exterior Identity and Visual Magnetism, (2) Intuitive Spatial Flow and Circulation, (3) Interactive Engagement and Hedonic Experience, (4) Staff as Co-Creators and Brand Ambassadors, and (5) Community Connection and Local Cultural Fit. Results show that experiential retail success depends on the synergy of aesthetic magnetism, seamless spatial planning, participatory engagement, and culturally responsive community-building. This integration transforms physical stores into immersive brand environments that reinforce global identity while resonating with local consumers, fostering emotional attachment, hedonic enjoyment, and purchase intention. By combining expert insights with existing literature, the study contributes a practical conceptual framework for global retailers seeking to merge universal brand identity with localized experiential strategies, offering guidance to achieve sustainable competitiveness in China's dynamic retail market.

Keywords: Global Brand Image; Store Design; Experiential Retail; Hedonic Value; New Retail; China; Thematic Analysis; Apple, LEGO

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's retail sector has experienced a profound transformation with the rapid rise of the "New Retail" model, which integrates online and offline channels, big data, and smart technologies to reshape consumer experience [1]. This evolution has created unprecedented market potential, attracting both global and domestic brands to compete for a share in an increasingly dynamic and expanding retail "blue

ocean." Within this highly competitive environment, the interplay between global brand image and localized store design has emerged as a decisive factor for success [2]. Store design is no longer limited to functional spatial arrangements but has evolved into a strategic tool for communicating brand identity and cultivating consumer loyalty [3].

Examples from leading global brands illustrate this shift. Apple stores, with their minimalist layouts, interactive product zones, and emphasis on openness, function as immersive experiential spaces that reinforce the brand's premium and innovative image [4]. LEGO's flagship outlets combine cultural motifs with interactive play areas, effectively merging global brand values with local sensibilities to deepen consumer engagement [5]. Such cases demonstrate how store design can influence customer flow, enhance comfort, foster emotional attachment, and encourage purchase behavior, thereby bridging global positioning with local expectations.

Central to this discussion is the notion of brand image, defined as the set of perceptions, associations, and meanings that consumers form through both direct and indirect experiences. A strong brand image facilitates consumer trust, strengthens differentiation, and serves as a critical entry point into competitive markets, particularly in China, where rising purchasing power, cultural identity, and digitalized lifestyles shape consumer expectations [6]. Among the determinants of brand image, store design plays a pivotal role, encompassing dimensions such as in-store interaction, cultural adaptation, and experiential engagement [7]. Moreover, the concept of hedonic value—the pleasure and enjoyment derived from shopping—further enhances consumer-brand relationships. Apple's transformation of its stores into "community hubs" and LEGO's creation of interactive play zones illustrate how hedonic value—the enjoyment, pleasure, and emotional satisfaction consumers derive from an experience beyond its functional benefits—reinforces brand perception and strengthens purchase intentions [8].

Despite growing scholarly interest in brand management and experiential retailing, significant gaps remain. Research has often examined brand image, store atmospherics, or hedonic consumption in isolation, with limited attention to their integrated effects in China's New Retail context [9]. Few studies have systematically explored how global brand image interacts with localized store design and hedonic value to influence consumer engagement and purchasing behavior in a market characterized by rapid technological and cultural shifts.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the dynamic interaction between global brand image and store design in China's New Retail landscape, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of hedonic value. The aim is to develop a framework that guides international brands in aligning global identity with localized retail strategies. In doing so, the research contributes theoretically by extending knowledge on brand image formation in cross-cultural retail settings and practically by offering actionable insights for global retailers seeking sustainable competitiveness in China. Looking ahead, this study also provides a foundation for future inquiries into digital in-store interactions, cultural adaptation mechanisms, and the evolving role of consumer experience in global retail innovation.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1. The innovation design of experiential retail

Experiential retail has increasingly been recognized as a key strategy to enhance consumer engagement in competitive markets. It emphasizes creating immersive and memorable shopping experiences that extend beyond functional product transactions [10,11]. Recent research further underscores that experiential environments do not merely attract attention but actively shape consumers' emotional, cognitive, and

behavioral responses by integrating multisensory stimuli—such as spatial layout, lighting, sound, and interactive technologies—to create a cohesive brand atmosphere. Architectural innovation and material advancements—such as glass façades, sustainable composites, and digitalized flagship environments—play a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions of modernity, transparency, and innovation [12,13]. In addition, experiential retail increasingly incorporates community-oriented spaces, storytelling elements, and participatory design features that foster a sense of belonging and encourage repeat visits.

Flagship stores of brands like Apple and Nike demonstrate how innovative design serves as both a global benchmark and a localized cultural expression, positioning the brand as an experiential leader and strengthening emotional brand connections [14,15]. These findings collectively suggest that innovative store design in experiential retail is closely tied to brand value creation, customer loyalty, and long-term differentiation in an increasingly experience-driven marketplace.

2.2. The improvement of hedonic value in store design

The influence of retail atmospherics on consumer behavior has been widely documented, with recent studies expanding on traditional frameworks such as the S-O-R model to emphasize multi-sensory, spatial, and emotional dimensions of shopping experiences [16,17]. Beyond visual cues, scholars highlight how tactile materials, ambient soundscapes, interactive displays, and even scent profiles contribute to shaping consumer affect and decision-making, reinforcing the holistic nature of atmospheric cues in experiential retail. Open layouts, intuitive navigation, accessible design, and lighting strategies have been shown to significantly affect shoppers' emotions and cognitive evaluations, improving perceptions of comfort, clarity, and brand coherence [18,19].

More recent work explores biophilic design and sustainability features as emerging drivers of positive affective responses, as they align consumer experience with broader lifestyle and environmental values and enhance perceptions of brand authenticity [20]. Additionally, research shows that the integration of digital technologies—such as augmented reality and responsive environments—further strengthens engagement by enabling personalized and interactive experiences. Comparisons across sectors—including technology retailers (e.g., Apple), luxury brands, and lifestyle stores—reveal how spatial design fosters both hedonic value and long-term consumer–brand relationships, positioning store environments as critical touchpoints in shaping brand meaning and consumer loyalty [21].

2.3. The improvement of purchase behavior in store design

Interaction design in retail settings emphasizes participatory touchpoints that enhance consumer engagement and foster community belonging. Recent studies highlight the role of AR/VR, digital interfaces, and tactile product testing in building hedonic value and influencing purchase intentions, as these technologies enable consumers to explore products more intuitively and immerse themselves in branded experiences [22]. Beyond digital interaction, research shows that participatory elements—such as hands-on demonstrations, maker-space activities, and co-creation zones—encourage active involvement rather than passive observation, increasing both emotional investment and perceived brand relevance.

Apple's "Today at Apple" sessions and LEGO's interactive play zones illustrate how in-store activities and workshops extend the brand experience into education and entertainment, strengthening loyalty and repeat visitation through community-building initiatives and skill-based learning opportunities [23]. Furthermore, emerging studies examine how social interactions within these spaces—such as peer collaboration, shared creative activities, and guided expert engagement—reinforce a sense of belonging and elevate the overall experiential value of the store environment.

Evidence suggests that these interactive features not only enhance hedonic consumption but also encourage consumers to co-create brand narratives, deepening their sense of affiliation and personal identification with the brand [24,25]. This co-creative process has been linked to stronger emotional attachment, heightened experiential satisfaction, and improved purchase behavior, positioning interaction design as a critical driver of contemporary experiential retail strategy.

2.4. The integration of brand image and culture

Global brand management in the New Retail context requires balancing universal brand consistency with cultural adaptation. The concept of "glocalization" [26] remains relevant, but contemporary studies highlight that effective adaptation goes beyond surface-level aesthetic changes. Scholars increasingly emphasize the importance of embedding culturally meaningful symbols, local craftsmanship, sustainable materials, and community-oriented design features to enhance authenticity and cultural resonance [27]. These design strategies help global brands navigate diverse consumer expectations while preserving the core brand narrative.

Apple's use of locally sourced stone in its Beijing flagship and LEGO's integration of cultural motifs in its Shanghai stores exemplify how global retailers reinterpret their brand through localized architectural language, enabling emotional and cultural alignment with local shoppers. Recent work also indicates that such adaptations support broader socio-cultural objectives, such as urban revitalization and community participation, positioning global brands as contributors to local identity rather than external impositions.

Emerging findings underline that culturally adaptive store design strengthens consumer identification with the brand by aligning global brand meaning with local values, aesthetics, and social norms. This alignment not only enhances perceived authenticity but also improves brand image, trust, and purchase intentions in diverse markets [28]. As a result, cultural adaptation has become a strategic pillar in experiential retail design, enabling global brands to remain competitive in culturally heterogeneous environments.

2.5. Conceptual framework

According to the results of literature review, four key variables (store design, hedonic value, cultural adaptation and purchase behavior) are identified that collectively shape brand image in global retail environments (as Fig. 1 listed).

Figure 1. Enhancing Brand Image through Retail Experience

Store design is the first key variable, shaping how physical environments influence brand perception. Consistent with the experience-economy perspective, meaningful, relational interactions—such as LEGO's family-oriented play zones—create emotional brand connections and show the importance of staff as culturally aware brand ambassadors [29].

Hedonic value is the second driver, where sensory-rich, playful elements like LEGO's AR kiosks or Dyson's demo stations extend dwell time and strengthen brand attachment, particularly in leisure-oriented markets such as China's weekend mall culture.

Cultural adaptation moderates these effects: localized design details (e.g., festival-themed displays) and service rituals (e.g., group workshops) heighten relevance while posing the challenge of balancing local resonance with global brand consistency [30].

The outcome is favorable purchase behavior—longer visits, larger baskets, and repeat patronage—confirming that experiential branding built on design, interaction, hedonic appeal, and cultural fit drives both immediate sales and long-term loyalty. This integrated model advances retail branding theory and offers actionable guidance for creating culturally resonant physical retail experiences.

As Figure 2 shown, by integrating these variables into a cohesive model, the proposed framework advances retail branding literature while offering actionable insights for global retailers [31]. To further identify the relationships between those variables, an expert interview was adopted in this research to support the proposed conceptual framework and related variables. The model ultimately provides a structured approach for leveraging physical retail spaces to create culturally resonant brand experiences in global markets [32].
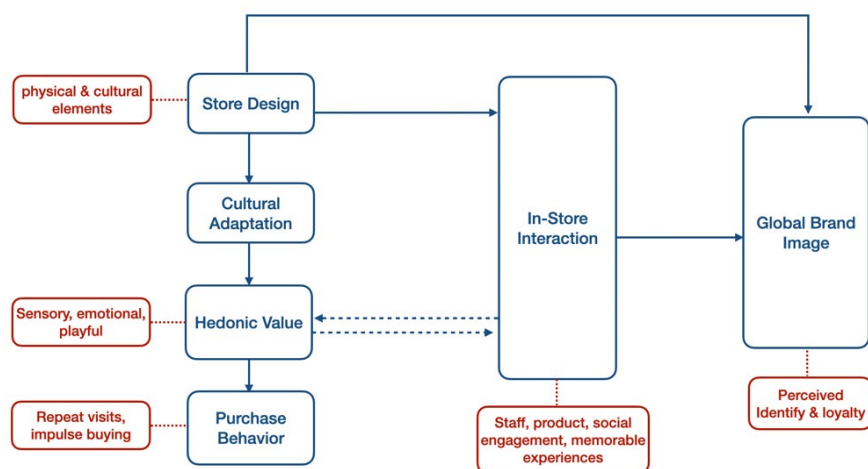

Figure 2. A Proposed Conceptual Framework on Experiential Retail Branding

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This research adopted an expert interview methodology to gather professional insights on how in-store interaction, hedonic value, and spatial–sensory design features of the Kunming Apple Store influence customer experience and reinforce Apple's brand image, while integrating local cultural elements into the global retail concept. Twelve experts, aged between 30 and 60 years, were purposefully selected based on their professional knowledge and experience in relevant fields, including interior design, visual design, marketing, branding, and retail operations. The selection criteria were designed to ensure a multidisciplinary

perspective, capturing diverse viewpoints on experiential retail design and its impact on consumer behavior. Experts were identified through professional networks, industry associations, and recommendations from academic and practitioner contacts, ensuring that each participant possessed substantial expertise in their domain. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights emerged in subsequent interviews, resulting in the inclusion of twelve experts [33].

Table 1. Categories and criteria selection of experts

Criteria of Experts Selection	
Interior Design	Senior interior designer with 5 years above experience.
Visual Design	Senior visual designer with 5 years above experience.
Marketing/ Branding	Senior marketing or branding specialist with at least 5 years of retail or brand-strategy experience.
Senior Shop Assistant	Senior shop assistant or retail manager with at least 5 years of front-line retail experience.

The expert sample included four interior designers, three visual designers, three marketing/branding experts, and two senior shop assistants (one from Apple and one from LEGO). Their years of professional experience ranged from 5 to 33 years, with an average of 12.5 years (see Table 2 for detailed background). All experts were thoroughly briefed on the research objectives, and prior to the interview sessions, they received an expert review form, including a consent form and detailed interview questions, to ensure informed participation.

Table 2. Respondent background for expert validation

Expert	Category	Years of work experience	Area of expertise
1	Interior Designer	11	Retail and commercial interior design
2	Interior Designer	15	Store layout planning and spatial design
3	Visual Designer	6	Visual merchandising and graphic design
4	Visual Designer	33	Brand-oriented visual communication
5	Marketing/Branding	7	Retail marketing and brand strategy
6	Senior Shop Assistant (Apple)	8	Customer experience and Apple store operations
7	Interior Designer	20	Experiential retail and concept development
8	Interior Designer	5	Interior styling and fixture design
9	Visual Designer	5	Store signage and display design
10	Marketing/Branding	25	Strategic marketing and brand management
11	Marketing/Branding	8	Digital marketing and consumer engagement
12	Senior Shop Assistant (Lego)	7	Retail operations and customer service (Lego)

3.2. Procedure

Apple and LEGO were selected for this study because they are global brands known for their experiential and innovative store designs, making them ideal for examining the interaction between global brand image and retail space in China's New Retail context. Despite operating in different product categories—technology and toys—both brands share key strategies, including hands-on interaction, flagship store designs that balance global branding with local adaptation, and community engagement through workshops and educational programs, making them comparable cases. Located in Kunming, a growing urban market with increasing disposable income and exposure to global brands, these flagship stores also hold

socio-economic significance by attracting consumers, influencing urban commercial development, and supporting employment and skill development in retail operations and visual merchandising.

Before conducting the expert review sessions, the interview protocol was meticulously documented to ensure the questions clarity and structure for experts to interview and answer. (The detailed interview questions can refer in appendix document.) The interview protocol included a structured questions and a consent form to gather experts' feedback for in-depth insights and comprehensive answers. Then, the expert interview process was divided into the following phases. First, 12 selected experts were invited to participate through email or communication software (wechat). The invitation email was written with Chinese or English to each expert after got their agreement to participate this interview. Then, once they consented to participate this interview, the final digital interview form was sent to them for answering, the timeline for this process is set at two weeks, from 28 July to 12 Aug 2025, allowing expert ample time to give comprehensive feedback regrading those interview questions.

3.3. Data analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using Atlas.ti software. Thematic analysis was identified as a suitable methodology because it allows for a systematic examination of patterns and meanings within complex qualitative data, making it particularly effective for exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions. This approach facilitated a rigorous coding process in which key themes, patterns, and relationships within the interview responses were identified. The coding process involved labeling meaningful units of text and grouping them into broader categories that represent the experts' perspectives on the interaction between global brand image and store design in China's New Retail landscape. Through thematic analysis, the study generated valuable insights into practical considerations and key variables of global brand image and store design, which are critical for developing guidance for future store design strategies.

4. Results

4.1. Summary of the interview transcript and the coding process

Twelve expert interviews were conducted with professionals from interior design, visual merchandising/design, marketing/branding, and senior shop assistance (six experts were answering APPLE Brand questions and six experts were answering LEGO Brand questions, all based in Kunming city). Each interview transcript was imported into ATLAS.ti software for analysis. The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis, beginning with repeated reading of all transcripts for familiarization, generating 134 open codes on concepts such as transparent façade, fluid circulation, interactive play, brand consistency, and community engagement, merging similar codes into broader categories like customer flow, hedonic interaction, and local culture adaptation, identifying five overarching themes that captured shared design and branding insights across Apple and LEGO stores, reviewing and refining these themes against the raw data for coherence and saturation, and finally defining and naming the themes to align with the research objectives and questions.

The process ensured analytic rigor and enabled a rich understanding of how spatial design, interaction, and branding converge in experiential retail. The coding results as Table 3 listed, a total five common themes were extracted and coded from transcribed interview through qualitative software Atlas.ti. These themes support the first research question and serve as criteria for the guidance for future store design.

Table 3. Summary of the interview coding, category and themes

Interpretive Coding	Category / Code group	Pattern Coding (Themes)
signature colors, glass pavilion, primary-color facade,	Exterior Design	Exterior Identity and Visual Magnetism
Transparent facade, visibility from street, large signage, night-time lighting	Visual Appeal	
Radial flow, barrier-free paths, wide central aisle, looping layout, extended dwell time	Spatial Flow	Intuitive Spatial Flow and Circulation
Intuitive circulation, natural wayfinding	Navigation	
Hands-on product trial, Pick & Build Wall, Play Area, tactile exploration	Interactive Engagement	Interactive Engagement and Hedonic Experience
Multi-sensory touch, pleasure-driven shopping	Hedonic Experience	
Genius Bar consultation, creative staff guidance, workshops	Staff Roles	Staff as Co-Creators and Brand Ambassadors
Staff as facilitators, personalized service, trust building	Customer Facilitation	
Community events, social gathering space	Community	Community Connection and Local Cultural Fit
Local stone/bamboo accents, Mandarin workshops, family-oriented culture	Local Cultural Integration	

*(**Source:** Author's own drawings)*

4.2. Theme 1: Exterior identity and visual magnetism

According to the results from expert interview, the store design in terms of exterior identify and visual magnetism are critical. Experts highlighted the transparent facades, signature colors, and dynamic lighting of both Apple and LEGO as powerful tools for instant attraction. Apple was described as a "floating glass pavilion" exuding elegance, while LEGO's primary-color facade and oversized signage conveyed playful creativity. This visibility fosters curiosity and lowers psychological barriers, drawing spontaneous visitors inside. The analysis of coding results of theme 1 are shown in Figure 3.

Experts consistently highlighted the instant visual appeal of both Apple and LEGO stores. Apple's façade was described as a "beautiful glass pavilion…giving the impression that the building is floating" (Apple–Visual Merchandiser 03), while LEGO's storefront was praised for "vibrant color palette…the facade feels almost like a playful, oversized LEGO model" (LEGO–Interior Designer 06). Lighting reinforces this draw: "During the day, the natural light gives it a soft, inviting glow, and at night, the store almost looks like it's floating" (Apple–Visual Merchandiser 04). Another LEGO expert noted that "the large glass panels let you peek inside, offering a view of the bright, well-lit interior that gives the store a sense of openness and transparency" (LEGO–Interior Designer 06). Such design choices make the exterior a brand statement and a magnet for curiosity, turning the façade into "a living advertisement" (LEGO–Marketing/Branding 05).
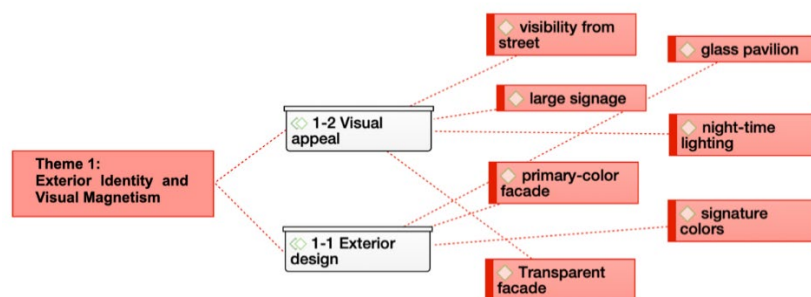

Figure 3. Theme 1 Exterior Identity and Visual Magnetism

4.3. Theme 2: Intuitive spatial flow and circulation

As the analysis of coding results of theme 2 are shown in Figure 4, theme 2 highlights an important direction of intuitive spatial flow and circulation in store design. All experts agreed that both stores provide barrier-free, intuitive navigation. Apple's wide central aisle and radial descent create a calm, exploratory path; LEGO's modified loop guides customers past the Pick & Build Wall and Play Area without congestion. Such seamless circulation extends dwell time and supports relaxed discovery—key to hedonic shopping experiences.

All participants described an effortless circulation that encourages exploration without signage. An Apple expert observed: "Traffic flow in the store could not have been more carefully planned…eliminating congestion even at peak times" (Apple–Visual Merchandiser 03). Similarly, a LEGO merchandiser explained: "The store follows a looping circulation model, ensuring visitors pass by all major zones without feeling forced" (LEGO–Visual Merchandiser 03). Strategic zoning was repeatedly noted: "From the entrance, my attention is immediately drawn to the Pick & Build Wall, which acts as a customer engagement anchor" (LEGO–Marketing/Branding 04). These design choices reduce cognitive effort and "make my shopping experience smooth and almost effortless" (Apple–Visual Merchandiser 04).
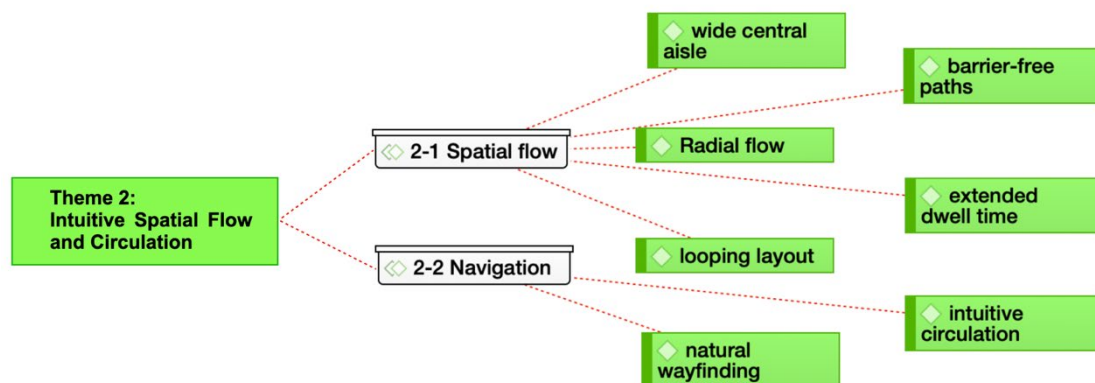

Figure 4. Theme 2 Intuitive Spatial Flow and Circulation

4.4. Theme 3: Interactive engagement and hedonic experience

Figure 5 illustrates a theme 3 of interactive engagement and hedonic experience in store design based on the coding analysis results. Both brands transform shopping into an immersive, multi-sensory activity. Apple encourages free device trials at open tables, while LEGO's Play Area and Pick & Build Wall invite customers of all ages to build and experiment. Experts linked these interactions to pleasure-driven (hedonic) value, fostering emotional attachment and increasing purchase intentions.

Hands-on interaction emerged as central to the pleasure of shopping. Apple experts celebrated the freedom to "pick them up and play…making every moment more palpable and worthwhile" (Apple–Visual Merchandiser 04). LEGO participants echoed this: "The Play Area isn't just an add-on—it's an anchor for engagement…turns passive shopping into an interactive experience" (LEGO–Visual Merchandiser 03). A senior LEGO staff member confirmed the impact: "Kids love testing out the bricks, and even adults get caught up in building something…that's when you know LEGO isn't just a toy—it's a way for people to connect" (LEGO–Senior Shop Assistant 06). Such multi-sensory encounters create what one Apple expert called a "pleasurable and hedonic experience, making it easy to imagine using the devices in real life" (Apple–Visual Merchandiser 03).
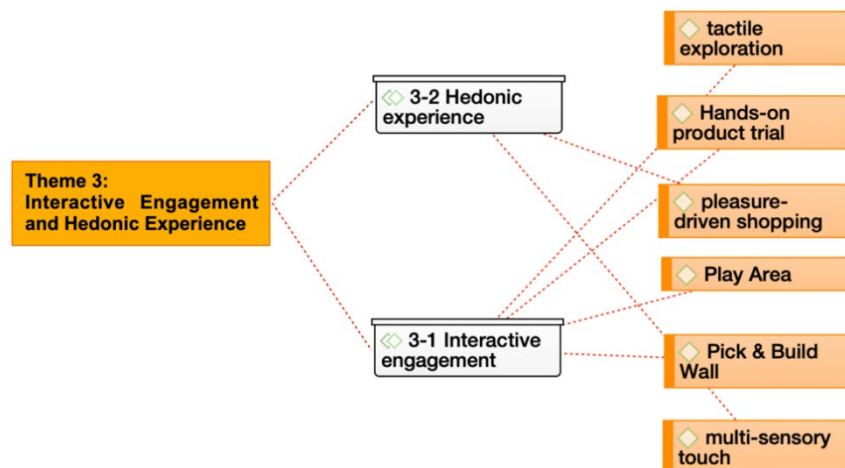
Figure 5. Theme 3 Interactive Engagement and Hedonic Experience

4.5. Theme 4: Staff as Co-Creators and Brand Ambassadors

Figure 6 illustrates a theme 4 of staff as co-creators and brand ambassadors in store design based on the coding analysis results. Across interviews, staff were praised for roles beyond sales. Apple's Genius Bar and LEGO's workshops and creative assistance allow employees to act as consultants and facilitators. These encounters create trust and community, positioning both stores as experience hubs rather than transactional outlets.

Participants repeatedly praised staff for facilitating creativity rather than pushing sales.

An Apple merchandiser remarked that the Genius Bar "isn't just a customer service counter—it's a carefully designed space that aligns with Apple's visual identity…providing a feeling of comfort and trust" (Apple–Visual Merchandiser 03).

At LEGO, a marketing expert recounted: "A staff member subtly introduced a hesitant adult to customizing builds…they left not only with a purchase but with a personal connection to the brand" (LEGO–Marketing/Branding 05). Another LEGO staff member shared, "We don't just sell products, we help people experience LEGO in a way that makes sense for them" (LEGO–Senior Shop Assistant 06). These narratives show employees acting as co-creators of memorable experiences and key brand ambassadors.
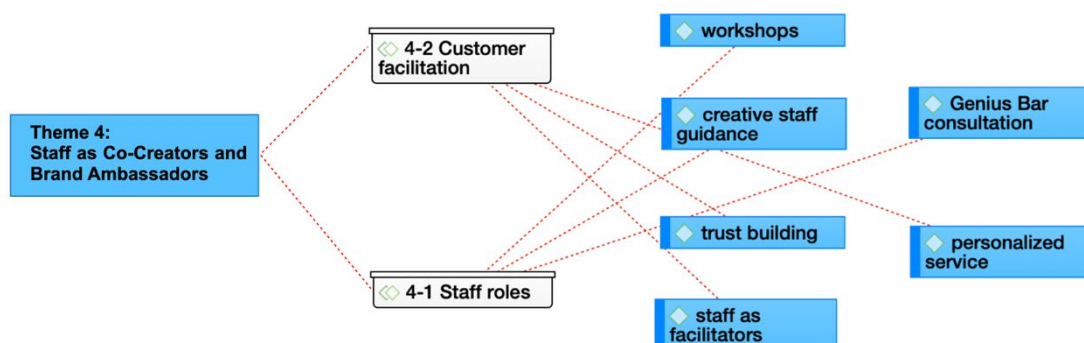

Figure 6. Theme 4 Staff as Co-Creators and Brand Ambassadors

4.6. Theme 5: Community Connection and Local Cultural Fit

Figure 7 illustrates a theme 5 of community connection and local cultural fit in store design based on the coding analysis results. Experts noted careful integration of Kunming's social and cultural context. Apple incorporates local stone and bamboo accents and hosts Mandarin-led creative sessions, while LEGO emphasizes family play zones and seasonal events. This localization strategy strengthens community identification and repeats visitation.

Finally, experts described how both stores function as community hubs and reflect Kunming's social culture. An Apple participant noted: "Apple creates an environment for learning and engagement with design workshops and tech sessions, establishing itself as a cultural leader and not just a commercial entity" (Apple–Visual Merchandiser 03). LEGO experts highlighted similar efforts: "The store offers workshops and activities that are not just about promotion—they're about fostering an experience" (LEGO–Interior Designer 07). Staff confirmed the local resonance: "Kunming shoppers love hands-on experiences, and this store gives them exactly that…designed to be a place where families can spend time together" (LEGO–Senior Shop Assistant 06).

By integrating local preferences and providing interactive events, the stores "become a place where people come to share their love for LEGO" (LEGO–Senior Shop Assistant 06) and strengthen their relevance within the Kunming community.
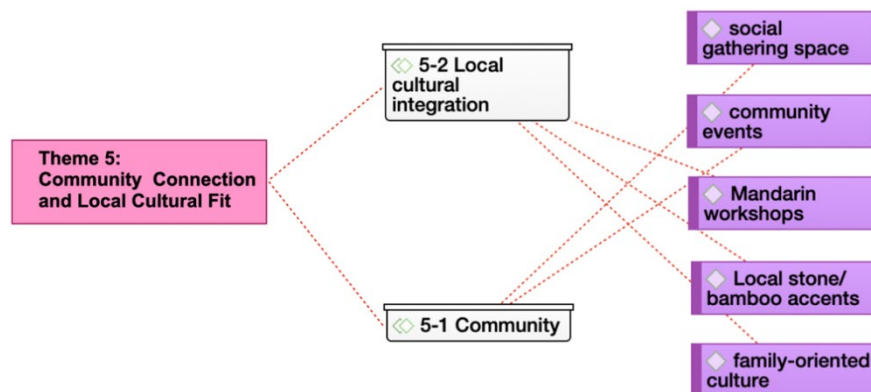

Figure 7. Theme 5 Community Connection and Local Cultural Fit

4.7. Key findings from the expert interview

Expert interviews reveal that Apple and LEGO's Kunming flagships transform physical stores into immersive brand experiences by combining striking exteriors, seamless interiors, interactive engagement, and local cultural resonance. Externally, Apple's "floating glass pavilion" and LEGO's vibrant, playful façade act as living advertisements that attract spontaneous visitors and lower psychological barriers. Inside, intuitive spatial flow—Apple's wide central aisle and LEGO's looping layout—supports effortless navigation, prolonging dwell time and encouraging relaxed exploration. Figure 8 presents a word cloud derived from qualitative data analysis highlighting the key design needs and concerns expressed by experts regarding the improvement of store design.

Figure 8. The Word's Cloud of Experts' Comments

Overall, this word cloud visually presents that store design requires several aspects needs that improve the following five dimensions which critical to improve the global brand image further to increase the purchase behavior among store customers, including: "Exterior Identity and Visual Magnetism", "Intuitive Spatial Flow and Circulation", "Interactive Engagement and Hedonic Experience", "Staff as Co-Creators and Brand Ambassadors", "Community Connection and Local Cultural Fit ".
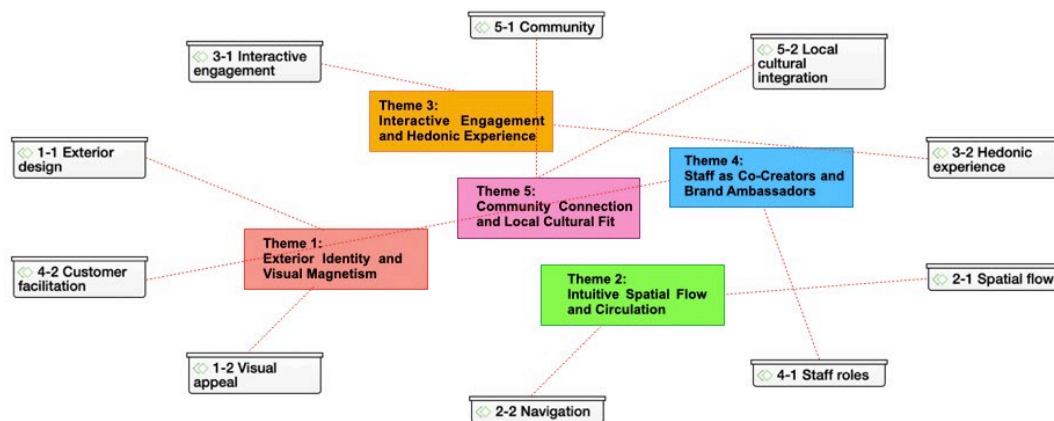

Figure 9. Five Themes Summarization

According to the expert interview findings, the results confirm and enrich the conceptual framework developed from the literature review, with the final model presented in Figure 10. As illustrated, six key variables were identified. Store design emerges as the primary driver influencing hedonic value, which in turn shapes consumers' final purchase behavior. Store design and hedonic value also foster in-store interaction, strengthening the global brand image. Purchase behavior and brand image function as dual outcome variables that reinforce each other: increased purchases enhance brand image, while a strong brand image encourages further purchasing. From a global perspective, local customers and cultural context require careful attention. The framework highlights the need for targeted actions to improve cultural adaptation, ensuring that global brands remain relevant and resonant in local markets.
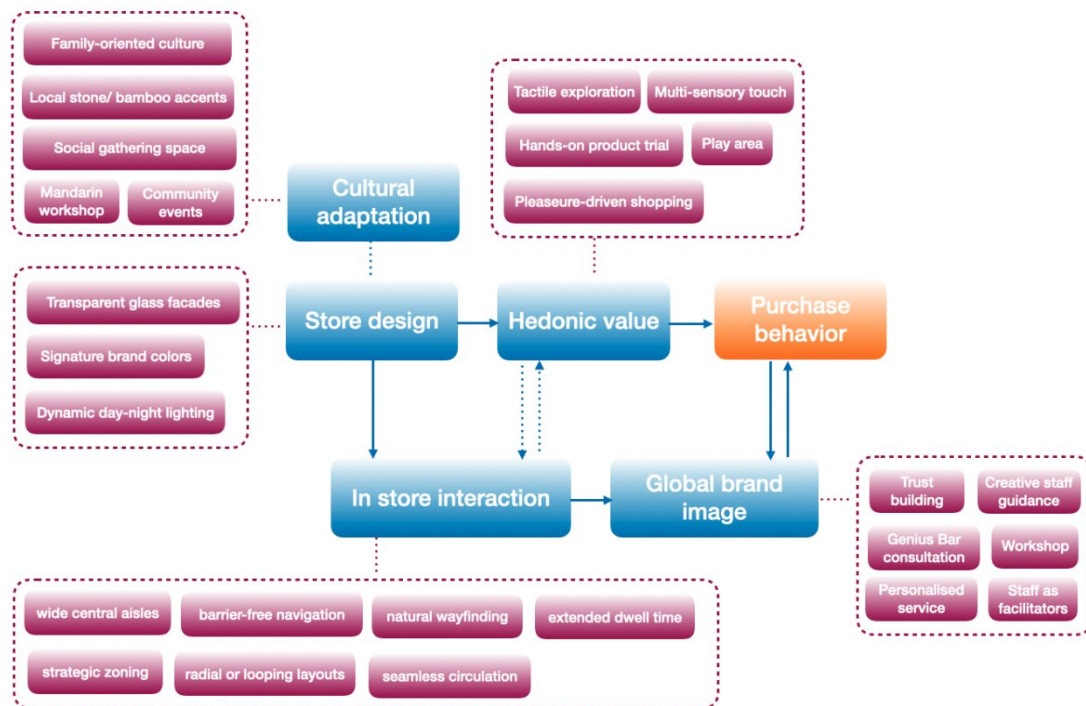
Figure 10. Theme 5 Community Connection and Local Cultural Fit

Both brands elevate shopping into play through hands-on, multi-sensory interaction: Apple's open tables and LEGO's Pick & Build Wall and Play Area foster hedonic enjoyment and emotional attachment. Staff further amplify this effect by serving as co-creators and brand ambassadors, from Apple's Genius Bar consultations to LEGO's creative workshops, cultivating trust and memorable experiences.

Finally, locally attuned design and programming—such as Kunming-inspired materials, Mandarin-led sessions, and family-oriented events—anchor the stores in their community, strengthening brand relevance and loyalty. Together, these findings demonstrate that carefully choreographed design, participatory engagement, and cultural adaptation are central to sustaining global brand identity while resonating with local consumers.

4.8. Validity and reliability of the interview

To ensure credibility and dependability, the study employed a triangulated validation strategy that integrated expert interviews with a supporting literature review. First, expert triangulation was achieved by interviewing 12 professionals in visual merchandising, interior design, marketing/branding, and retail operations, providing a balanced perspective on both Apple and LEGO stores. Second, member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries to participants for confirmation, ensuring accurate representation of their views. Third, a detailed audit trail—including verbatim transcripts, coding notes, and theme-refinement records—was maintained to enable replication and verification.

The qualitative analysis of the literature review was performed using a structured thematic approach, where relevant studies were systematically coded to identify recurring concepts, patterns, and gaps related to experiential retail, hedonic engagement, and cultural adaptation. These literature-derived themes were then compared with the themes emerging from the expert interviews to enable data triangulation, ensuring that findings were supported by both practitioner insights and existing research evidence.

The coding process of interview data followed Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis and was cross-checked by two independent researchers to ensure consistency. By combining thematic analysis of interviews with a systematic examination of the literature, this triangulation approach strengthens the validity and reliability of the results, demonstrating that the final themes reflect both expert experience and established scholarly knowledge.

5. Discussion

The expert interviews reveal a cohesive picture of how store design, customer interaction, and brand identity interweave to create memorable retail experiences. Exterior Identity and Visual Magnetism emerged as the critical first impression: transparent façades, dramatic lighting, and signature brand colors immediately communicate Apple's elegance and LEGO's playful creativity, enticing spontaneous entry and reinforcing brand recognition. Intuitive Spatial Flow and Circulation supports a seamless journey, with radial or looping layouts, wide aisles, and natural wayfinding extending dwell time and encouraging relaxed exploration. Interactive Engagement and Hedonic Experience highlight the power of hands-on activities—LEGO's Pick & Build Wall and Apple's open product try-outs—where multi-sensory touchpoints foster pleasure-driven shopping and deepen emotional connection to the brand. Staff as Co-Creators and Brand Ambassadors further extend the design narrative: Apple's Genius Bar consultations and LEGO's creative workshops transform staff into facilitators of trust, learning, and co-created experiences. Finally, Community Connection and Local Cultural Fit demonstrates how global brands localize through Kunming-inspired materials, Mandarin-led sessions, and family-oriented activities, positioning the stores as community hubs rather than mere retail outlets.

These empirical insights align closely with the conceptual framework developed from the literature review, which integrates store design, hedonic value, staff interaction, and cultural adaptation as key drivers of brand attachment and purchase behavior. Prior studies on the experience economy (e.g., Khan et al., 2025) and hedonic consumption theory emphasize that meaningful, relational interactions create emotional brand connections—precisely what experts observed in Apple's and LEGO's spaces. The literature further underscores the moderating role of cultural adaptation [33], supporting our finding that localized materials, seasonal events, and language-specific workshops enhance relevance without diluting global brand equity. By triangulating expert interviews with this theoretical foundation, the framework confirms that aesthetic magnetism, intuitive spatial design, participatory engagement, and culturally attuned community-building work in concert to elevate brand experience and drive purchase intention.

Despite methodological rigor—including triangulation of literature review and expert testimony—this study reflects the perspectives of a single city (Kunming) and two global brands. The findings may not fully represent other cultural contexts or retail categories. Additionally, while qualitative insights illuminate relationships among design, interaction, and brand attachment, they do not quantify their relative impact on sales or loyalty. Future research could test the proposed framework across diverse markets and incorporate consumer surveys or behavioral data to validate and extend these conclusions.

6. Conclusion

This expert-interview study demonstrates that Apple and LEGO's flagship stores in Kunming achieve brand-centric experiential retail by harmonizing visual identity, spatial planning, interactive engagement, and local cultural adaptation. Transparent façades and vibrant exteriors act as brand beacons, while intuitive circulation and multi-sensory interaction sustain exploration and enjoyment. Staff members serve as co-creators of experience, guiding and educating customers to reinforce trust and brand loyalty. Finally, the

integration of community-oriented activities and locally relevant design elements strengthens cultural fit and fosters lasting emotional bonds.

By triangulating these interview findings with the supporting literature review, the study confirms that hedonic value and interactive engagement are central—rather than peripheral—to shaping brand image and customer satisfaction. The resulting conceptual framework highlights how store design, staff facilitation, and cultural adaptation jointly drive experiential value and purchase behavior.

Practically, the research offers actionable guidance for global retailers seeking to convert physical stores into immersive brand environments: success depends on balancing a consistent global identity with localized experiential strategies. Future studies should test this framework in diverse markets and incorporate quantitative consumer data to validate its broader applicability and refine the relationships among design, culture, and customer outcomes.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

References

1. Sikos TT, Kozák T, Kovács A. New retail models in online and offline space. Deturope–The Central European Journal of Regional Development and Tourism. 2019;11(3):9-28. doi:10.32725/det.2019.024
2. Roth MS. The effects of culture and socioeconomics on the performance of global brand image strategies. J Mark Res. 1995;32(2):163-175. doi:10.1080/00913367.1995.10673489
3. Kirby AE, Kent AM. Architecture as brand: store design and brand identity. J Prod Brand Manag. 2010;19(6):432-439. doi:10.1108/10610421011085749
4. Jiang X, Feng Y. The Construction Process of Immersive Commercial Spaces: A Case Study of Apple Store. In: International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction. Springer Nature Switzerland; 2025:66-79. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-93230-4_5
5. Chen M, Li X, Wang Y, Jiang Y, Li H, Liu W, et al. Building Beyond Blocks: User-Centered Innovations in LEGO Design for Unleashing Creativity and Play. In: International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction. Springer Nature Switzerland; 2025:190-205. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-93227-4_14
6. Ngo TTA, An GK, Dao DK, Nguyen NQN, Nguyen NYV, Phong BH. Roles of logistics service quality in shaping Generation Z customers' repurchase intention and electronic word of mouth in E-commerce industry. PLOS ONE. 2025;20(5):e0323962. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0323962
7. Wang N, Jia C, Wang J, et al. Identifying key factors influencing immersive experiences in virtual reality enhanced museums. Sci Rep. 2025;15:31990. doi:10.1038/s41598-025-15628-y
8. Li Y, Pitafi AH, Li H. Investigating the factors of enterprise social media strain: The role of enterprise social media's visibility as a moderator. PLOS ONE. 2022;17(3):e0264726. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0264726
9. Kuo YH. The retail brand personality—Behavioral outcomes framework: Applications to identity and social identity theories. Front. Psychol. 2022;13:903170. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2022.903170
10. Scholz J, Smith AN. Augmented reality: Designing immersive experiences that maximize consumer engagement. Bus Horiz. 2016;59(2):149-161. doi: 10.1016/j.bushor.2015.10.003
11. Bonfanti A, Vigolo V, Vannucci V, Brunetti F. Creating memorable shopping experiences to meet phygital customers' needs: evidence from sporting goods stores. Int J Retail Distrib Manag. 2023;51(13):81-102. doi:10.1108/ijrdm-12-2021-0588
12. Cuce PM. Sustainable insulation technologies for low-carbon buildings: From past to present. Sustainability. 2025;17(11):5176. doi:10.3390/su17115176
13. Almusaed A, Yitmen I, Almssad A. Contemporary innovations and sustainable practices in the application of clay materials within architectural design and construction methodologies. In: Developments in Clay Science and Construction Techniques. IntechOpen; 2024. doi:10.5772/intechopen.1005787
14. Alaali A. Creating a List of Localization Methods for Global Brands When Designing Their Spaces Around the World. In: International Conference CITAA Cities Identity Through Architecture and Arts. Springer Nature Switzerland; 2023:145-151. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-60641-0_13
15. Wilson M. Relational Marketing: Case Studies and Best Practices in Multisensory Design, Gamification and Empathetic Communication to Cultivate Brand Experiences. 2024. doi:10.17615/egxd-3715

16. Ustazah EN, Setijanti P, Hayati A. Experiential retailing in cultural spaces: A case study of multisensory design in batik boutiques. F1000Res. 2025;14:506. doi:10.12688/f1000research.163519.1
17. Errajaa K, Bilgihan A. Crafting captivating retail spaces: the power of atmosphere in shaping consumer behavior. J Mark Anal. 2025;1-18. doi:10.1057/s41270-025-00407-5
18. Florea NV, Croitoru G, Coman DM, Coman MD. The influence of fashion retailers on customer psychology using visual merchandising and store layout to improve shopping decision. J Theor Appl Electron Commer Res. 2025;20(1):40. doi:10.3390/jtaer20010040
19. Kalantari S, Cruz-Garza J, Xu TB, Mostafavi A, Gao E. Store layout design and consumer response: A behavioural and EEG study. Build Res Inf. 2023;51(8):897-914. doi:10.1080/09613218.2023.2201415
20. Rosenbaum MS, Ramirez GC, Camino JR. A dose of nature and shopping: The restorative potential of biophilic lifestyle center designs. J Retail Consum Serv. 2018; 40:66-73. doi: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.08.018
21. Ramaswamy V, Ozcan K. Brand value co-creation in a digitalized world: An integrative framework and research implications. Int J Res Mark. 2016;33(1):93-106. doi: 10.1016/j.ijresmar.2015.07.001
22. Cunha MN, Krupsky OP. Transforming online retail: The impact of augmented and virtual reality on consumer engagement and experience in e-commerce. Uluslararası Sosyal Siyasal ve Mali Araştırmalar Dergisi. 2025;5(1):189-201. doi:10.1016/10.70101/ussmad.1630528
23. Anteblian B, Cadenat S. Building experiential contexts in-store: what levers should be associated with each experience?. Décisions Marketing. 2024;115(3):209-229. doi:10.3917/dm.115.0067
24. Merrilees B. Interactive brand experience pathways to customer-brand engagement and value co-creation. J Prod Brand Manag. 2016;25(5):402-408. doi:10.1108/jpbm-04-2016-1151
25. Cheung ML, Pires GD, Rosenberger PJ, De Oliveira MJ. Driving consumer–brand engagement and co-creation by brand interactivity. Mark Intell Plan. 2020;38(4):523-541. doi:10.1108/mip-12-2018-0587
26. Schau HJ, Akaka MA, Segabinazzi RC. Localized globalization through structures of common difference and the in-store curation of a glocal retailscape. J Retail. 2023;99(4):634-653. doi:10.1509/jim.12.0105
27. Chang TY, Chuang YJ. Cultural sustainability: teaching and design strategies for incorporating service design in religious heritage branding. Sustainability. 2021;13(6):3256. doi:10.3390/su13063256
28. Nunticha P, Kajornatthapol P, Sakollawat KKS, Thumtheang S, Honglertsakul C. Designing Brand Identity FOT "KAE NOI" Green Products from Ethnic Groups through the Utiliztion of Cape Gooseberry Processed Items. J Int Crisis Risk Commun Res. 2024;7(S10):1330. doi:10.63278/jicrcr.vi.684
29. Khan MI, Fatima JK, Bahmannia S, Chatrath SK, Dale NF, Johns R. Investigating the influence of perceived humanization of service encounters on value creation of chatbot-assisted services. J Serv Theory Pract. 2025;35(1):56-88. doi:10.1108/JSTP-10-2023-0282
30. Charoensukmongkol P. The efficacy of cultural intelligence for adaptive selling behaviors in cross-cultural selling: The moderating effect of trait mindfulness. J Glob Mark. 2020;33(3):141-157. doi:10.1080/08911762.2019.1654586
31. Li J, Che Me R, Ahmad FA, Zhu Q. Investigating the application of IoT mobile app and healthcare services for diabetic elderly: A systematic review. PLOS ONE. 2025;20(4):e0321090. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0321090
32. Zhu Q. Flipped classroom for music theory course in Chinese universities: a conceptual framework of Flipped Classroom–Self-Directed Learning (FCM). Cogent Education. 2025;12(1):2498146. doi:10.1080/2331186X.2025.2498146
33. Li J, Me RC, Fakhruddin NNINM, et al. Investigating the needs of older adults with type 2 diabetes and conceptualizing a healthy diet management application: A conceptual design. BMC Geriatr. 2025;25:697. doi:10.1186/s12877-025-06265-1