Islamic Ornamentation and Identity in Modern Retail Interior Spaces on Reinterpreting Cultural Expression within the Malaysian Context

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Abstract

The speed at which the globalization of design has affected retail design has led to quite mediocre homogenization in today's retail interior design actually ruining local cultural identity. Whilst a lot of modern retail spaces in Malaysia adopt an unoriginal international minimalist and industrial styles, there is often no real consideration for local cultural context or as it's seen a meaningful form of identity. The research aims to explore how local cultural context such as Malay Islamic motifs and ornamentation can be translated into the modern retail interior context, and preserved as a form of identity of culture with contemporary functionality in design. A qualitative multiple-case study approach is undertaken where the selected Malaysian retail interiors that are incorporated with Malay Islamic design form part of the research. The information was gathered in an organized manner through semi structured interviews with retail owners and interior designers. Thematic analysis uncovers three prevailing strategies of adaptation; the translation of Islamic geometric and arabesque motives into new materials and fabrication processes; the incorporation of decoration as spatial layer, rather than surface ornamentation, and the remediation process created with light modulation, texture and interactive storytelling to add spaces for user perception. The results indicates that a context-based re-interpreting strategy to integrate the Islamic ornamentation into retail space is essential for integrating this Islamic signage in retail store where the modern commercial value of branding must be balanced through meaningful cultural reference. This paper supports the conversation about culturally sustainable interior architecture by suggesting a design references for accommodating Islamic motifs in contemporary retail spaces, particularly in Malaysia. Finally, the findings provide designers and retailers with practical references on how to enhance local identity while taking advantage of global retail trends.

Introduction

The rapid globalization of retail design has had a profound impact on the aesthetics of interior environments across the board and there's never been a stronger demand for uniform aesthetic using minimalist palette, industrial finishes and universal branding strategies (Rashdan & Ashour, 2024). Despite the fact that these strategies foster global market specialization and competitiveness, they frequently result in de-localization of place culture differences (Rashdan & Ashour, 2024). In a heavily multicultural context like Malaysia, retail interiors are more aptly assimilated into global design trends from where they originate than to produce culturally and technically defensible products (Hilmee & Kosman, 2023).

Local Malaysia culture such as Malay Islamic ornament as part of this rich heritage with geometric polygonal patterns, swirling arabesque motifs, calligraphic elements and its symbolic spatial hierarchies- has served as more than just decorative orders (RASHDAN & Ashour, 2022). It represents the philosophical concepts of unity (*tawhid*), infinity, system and spiritual connection (Zahra & Shahir, 2022). But these symbolic forms have only been surface value, or non-existent, in the context of Malaysian retail climates today. Without a proper integration, will lose particular culture and the identity of space in trade areas.

Limited academic studies of local culture Islamic decoration within commercial retail interiors can be identified within the literature, which has focused largely on architecture in the form of mosques. The existing studies also mostly concentrate on the religious or historic building, leaving a gap to gain an understanding on how Islamic motifs are creatively re-interpreted in retail spaces of a modern design. In addition, there is a lack of guidance on designing culturally sensitive retail spaces in the context of Malaysia. Whilst many retail interiors employ a global aesthetic there is no systematic methodology to incorporate local cultural identity. Scarcity of systematic references on Islamic ornamentation in retail interior has contributed to a patchy response from superficial ornamental insertion to complete disregard. This is a gap that needs empirical investigation in terms of designers and store owners ' professional perspectives, and user experiences to create contextual adaptation references

Literature Review

Islamic Ornamentation as Cultural Identity

Islamic decorative art is characterized and shaped by non-figural artistic structures, which highlight the role of geometry before abstraction of objects (Khalifa & Lafi, 2025). The sacred geometry unity and cosmic; harmony and arabesque patterns; continuity and growth. Ornament in Islamic architecture has traditionally been an identity statement, a means of conveying cultural and spiritual tales by means of spatial articulation (Zahra & Shahir, 2022).

Identity Formation in Retail Interior Design

Retail space design strategy for brand building retail interior design has a strategic role to play in shaping the identity of the brand (Noordin & Mohamad, 2025). Emotion and perceived quality also stem from spatial arrangement, material, light and texture (Bettaieb & Alsobahi, 2022). According to the experiential retail model, atmosphere plays a dominant role in

consumers' behavior (Szocs et al., 2023). Spatial identity located in cultural place promotes authenticity and distinction (Ustazah et al., 2025).

Cultural Sustainability in Interior Architecture
Cultural sustainable dimension does not concern only the environmental but also intangible heritage that is preserved through land-use (Rashdan & Ashour, 2024). In fast-modernizing societies, putting cultural identity into commercial space will promote social continuity and local characteristics (Lilia, 2024). In the Malaysian setting, culturally sustainable retail design is also less matured.

Adaptation versus Replication
Good reinterpretation of Islamic ornament is allowed to be abstract not literal (Noordin & Mohamad, 2025). From this point of view, a modernist adaptation is a digital synthesis, parametric translation, material reinvention and special integration. This makes the content remain pertinent while staying true to itself (Ahamad & Yasmoon, 2024).

Methodology
This paper uses a qualitative multi-case study methodology to examine the interpretative and experiential aspects of local culture Malay Islamic ornament in contemporary retail environments. The qualitative approach is thus relevant in that it aims, not at quantifiable performances indicators but at the grasp of symbolic meanings spatial narratives and processes of identity construction. This multi-case study design allows comparison across a number of retailing contexts, enabling common and unique themes to be exposed. By exploring a few case studies in Malaysia, this paper demonstrates how the local culture, such as Malay Islamic decoration of the local culture is decoded and translated into actual commercial environment. In this way the cultural ideality can be rightly set into relation to space, material surface and even user.

The research consisted of three shopkeepers, three interior designers who had worked on the selected projects and twenty visitors who transcribed their shopping experiences. Retail environments in Malaysia displayed purposive samples of retail interiors, where Islamic design is intentionally integrated into the environment. In this method of sampling, the participants has an applied and academic experience in the field of Islamic ornamental environment structure. The retailers were selected because they had been involved in marketing and conceptual strategy; the designers because of the explicit interlocking of cultural meanings with individual models. Visitors on site were subsequently approached to generate a different user token, causing the knowledge and popular responses to go hand in hand.

To strengthen the validity of the approach, data were obtained in equivalent qualitative form. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with shopkeepers and designers regarding topics like design intention, material selection, brand management and design implementation issue of Islamic motif in contemporary shopping space. The interview format enabled participants to share their thoughts on symbolic meanings and situational understandings. Feedback from visitors was received through short, structured questionnaires on perception, emotion, and cultural identity space recognition. Site and photographic documentation was also used to record the application of materials, lighting

effects, spatial depth, and ornament. The two methods combined allowed a deep reflection on design processes and the experience of these.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis in the way of identifying regular content across cases, meanings, and adaptation process. Data was condensed into themes; material relatedness, spatial integration with the environment, symbolic relevance, sensorial experience and corporate congruence. Findings were then compared across retail cases for similarities and situational specificities. With the help of straightforward, descriptive statistics, responses to visitor feedback were analyzed to be able to provide a statement regarding the tendencies in perception and cultural acknowledgement. Drawing on the thematic and descriptive analysis, the analytical process aimed at incorporation of professional perception with user experience towards achieving a holistic understanding regarding how Islamic ornament influences identity in contemporary retail interiors.

Results
Abstraction through Contemporary Materials
Interviews results with designers, which indicates a process of abstracting local culture Malay Islamic ornament with new material and manufacturing processes is also present in all three cases. The sole point upon which all the interior designers agreed was that Islamic geometric and arabesque motifs should be reimagined through contemporary production techniques rather than simply reproduced. As well as saying abstraction communicates tradition, it also links with 'modern retail branding' and a lack of clutter.

Two designers (66.7%) concurred that laser-cut metal panels and CNC-built timber screens work well as spatial filters, adding layering and controlled transparency to retail zoning. 39% of the designers surveyed mentioned Etched Glass as a discreet form to bring in motifs without overexposing them throughout the space. Abstraction as a means to prevent visual over-saturation and maintain cultural relevance in contemporary retail environments was a unanimous (100%) agreement from all designers. In general, material innovation was seen as a strategic instrument to strengthen identity and commercial robustness.

Table 1, shows the interior designers' perceptions on abstraction through contemporary materials.

Table 1

Summary of Presents Interior Designers' Perspectives on The Abstraction of Islamic Ornamentation Through Contemporary Materials

No.	Aspect	Description	Sample Statement	% of Respondents
1.	Use of laser-cut metal panels for geometric patterns	Enhances spatial layering and modern aesthetic coherence.	Laser-cut metal allows to reinterpret geometry in a refined and contemporary way.	66.7% (2)
2.	CNC-cut timber screens as cultural dividers	Functions as spatial filter rather than decoration.	The pattern becomes part of zoning, not just ornament.	66.7% (2)
3.	Etched glass for subtle motif integration	Maintains brand sophistication through minimal application.	Glass etching keeps the motif elegant and not overpowering.	33.3% (1)
4.	Preference for abstraction over literal replication	Avoids visual overload and aligns with retail branding.	Abstraction keeps the identity relevant to today's customers.	100% (3)
5.	Contemporary materials enhance cultural reinterpretation	Supports innovation while preserving symbolic essence.	Modern fabrication helps translate tradition into current design language.	100% (3)

Ornamentation as Spatial Layering
Interviews results with store owners, Islamic decoration serves as good spatial layering rather than surface embellishment. Use of geometric screens, patterned panels and ceiling treatment all function as positive spaces for organization and customer experience, according to all participants.

The two retailers (66.7%) indicated that perforated panels and patterned dividers bring semi-private areas while keeping an unobstructed view as well as exchanging the flow of traffic. The ornamented ceilings and entrance thresholds as strong identity signs that distinguish my outlets from competitors, the owner of a quarter (33.3%) of the shops said. Spatial layering supports brand identity and the creation of a culturally appealing retail environment All interviewees (100%) concurred on this point, inasmuch as decoration is seen to be an effective tool for brand expression and commercial performance.

Table 2, shows the store owners' perceptions on ornamentation as spatial layering.

Table 2
Summary of Store Owners' Perspectives on Spatial Integration of Islamic Ornamentation

No.	Aspect	Description	Sample Statement	% of Respondents
1.	Use of patterned dividers for zoning	Enhances semi-private retail areas and circulation flow.	The patterned screens help organize the space without blocking visibility.	66.7% (2)
2.	Ornamented ceiling treatments as identity markers	Reinforces brand uniqueness and visual focus.	The ceiling pattern becomes the highlight customers remember.	33.3% (1)
3.	Spatial layering improves customer experience	Creates depth, hierarchy, and immersive atmosphere.	Customers feel the space is more premium and culturally meaningful.	100% (3)
4.	Ornamentation strengthens brand recognition	Enhances differentiation from generic retail stores.	It gives the store a distinctive identity compared to others.	100% (3)

Experiential Identity Enhancement
Visitors results feedback highlights, experiential identity enrichment is the most prominent result of infusing Islamic ornamentation in the retail space. Respondents responded highly to variations in lighting as well as shadows, texture materials, graphic design and motifs to epitomize geometric and arabesque designs that would differentiate this environment from other retail.

Fifteen visitors (75%) associated ornamented interiors on site with strong local cultural identity, and sixteen visitors (80%) judged them as more relevant and authentic. Fourteen participants (70%) felt that the images were more personal and memorable, and twelve (60%) reported a calming effect of soft lighting with patterns of shadow. Overall, the results suggest that experiential cues such as lighting, texture and spatial articulation are significantly influential in providing references to culture and emotion-scapes in relation to contemporary retail experience.

Table 3, shows the visitors' perceptions on experiential identity enhancement in ornamented retail interiors.

Table 3
Summary of Visitors' Perceptions of Experiential Identity Enhancement in Ornamented Retail Interiors

No.	Aspect	Description	Sample Statement	% of Respondents
1.	Stronger local cultural identity	Ornamented space perceived as culturally grounded	It feels more Malaysian and culturally connected.	75% (15)
2.	Sense of calmness and comfort	Lighting and shadow create soothing atmosphere	The lighting makes the space feel peaceful.	60% (12)
3.	Store uniqueness and memorability	Motifs enhance distinctiveness compared to generic stores	Remember this store because of the patterns.	14% (70)
4.	Authentic and meaningful experience	Ornamentation enhances cultural authenticity	Feels more authentic than typical modern shops.	80% (16)
5.	Enhanced emotional engagement	Spatial atmosphere increases emotional connection	The design makes the space more engaging.	65% (13)

Discussion and Conclusion
Islamic Ornamentation as a Strategic Identity Framework
The findings of the present study propose Islamic ornamentation as an identity architecture, not merely aesthetic adornment. In the cases, ornament as a way of creating figure of spatial experience was adopted in the revelation of spatial zoning, material articulation and atmospheric modulation. This progression from surface decoration to a total spatial system, shows a move towards contextual redefining where typologies are re-imagined and motifs are extracted and worked into the contemporary language of design. And it is this hybrid that accounts for so much continuity across the cultures, and for which the product appears so fresh on contemporary retail shelves. So, Islamic ornament is now placed here in a space not of being ornamental but as an actor on the construction of identity, hierarchy and experience dimensions.

Balancing Branding and Cultural Symbolism
Findings of retail branding, and cultural symbolism are not opposing point of views. This study adds evidence of this fact. Strained decoration is used instead, to dramatize the brand-authenticity and spatial distinctions of retailing in a fiercely competitive world. Designers and retailers have realized that there is room for low-level abstraction, some new-material whim, as well as the cute little bit of cultural guidance or the racy riff on branding. Still, they warn that simple solutions and overuse can result in tokenism, visual clutter or a lack of aesthetic harmony. In a good integration, there is tension and balance between idea, materiality and lighting so ornament becomes support to the brand instead of competing with it.

Cultural Responsiveness in a Globalized Retail Context

For the findings of multi-ethnic and market-oriented retail scenario in Malaysia, a socio-cultural design strategy plays an important role to maintain spatial identities along with commercial purposes. The imposing nature of global minimalist aesthetics promotes a uniform retail environment that has no sense of being local. The results suggest that the adaptive reuse of Islamic ornament in retail might provide a model for culturally sustainable retail interiors. Designers could unite global retail requirements with local stories by including symbolic references in today's box. Ultimately, culturally rooted retail architecture not only reflects the identity but also promotes emotional and social bonding in an ever-urbanizing environment.

Conclusion

This paper emphasizes the significance of situational re-interpretation when local culture, such as Malay Islamic ornament is employed and preserved into modern retail environment. Methods used result in a demonstration of how abstraction, space layering and phenomenological engagement keeps cultural identity alive. The Islamic ornament could be integrated into a locally friendly retail design for Malaysia when the appropriate and sensitive adaptation to the context is made it can be use of Islamic ornament, by integrating that in culturally sustainable retail design in Malaysian. Figure 1, a conceptual visualization of application of local culture example Malay Islamic geometric metal partition in a contemporary retail interior. Figure 2, a conceptual visualization of installation of local culture example Malay Islamic geometric ornamentation on glass wall partitions in retail environments.

Figure 1: Conceptual visualization of local culture such as Malay Islamic geometric metal partition in a contemporary retail interior.
Source: Author

Figure 2: Conceptual visualization of local culture such as Malay Islamic geometric pattern on glass partition in modern retail space.
Source: Author

Research Contribution

This research broadens the local culture design such as Malay Islamic design language discourse from religious and heritage architecture to contemporary retail interiors, indicating that Islamic motifs can be an adaptable heritage code in commercial spaces. It proposes a culture-driven retail model of sustainable that takes into consideration material innovation, spatial layering and experience articulation to retain culture identity and apply it in commercial use. In combining Islamic ornamentation theory with experiential retail theory, the study shows that symbolic motifs contribute to emotional engagement-enhancing, spatial perception-increasing and brand differentiation-contributing, by which it contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues within the fields of interior architecture and retail design.

Practical Contributions

The findings of this study contribute practical design references to incorporate local culture design such as Malay Islamic pattern into contemporary retail interior design with modern brand consistency. By virtue of its abstraction, re-materializations and their modulation in space, it presents feedback to inform culturally sensitive retail design. The results help designers and retailers to enhance brand authenticity and spatial differentiation, so that the customer-to-store emotional connection becomes stronger. Furthermore, the research generates empirical evidence toward an endogenous design approach within interior architecture education context, and could benefit future policy of Malaysian retail design to represent identity in a globalizing trend of urban area.

Acknowledgement

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