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Effect of In-Store Product Arrangement and Display Strategies on Sales Performance in Supermarkets: A Qualitative Study in Mwanza City, Tanzania

By

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Abstract

Merchandising evidence comes mostly from high-income, technologically advanced markets, so supermarket managers in sub-Saharan Africa often rely on intuition when arranging stores. This study examined how end-cap promotions, cross-merchandising, and strategic shelf allocation affect sales performance in four supermarkets in Mwanza City, Tanzania, guided by the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model. Using an interpretivist, qualitative, descriptive design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively sampled managers, supervisors, and merchandising staff, supported by non-participant observation and documentary review, and analyzed the data thematically. End-caps triggered purchases only when placed where shoppers change direction and paired with a clear price incentive, and their effect faded within about two weeks. Cross-merchandising enlarged baskets and cut search time when pairings and themes were culturally intuitive, but strained labor and stock where inventory was manual. The "eye-level is buy-level" principle held, while bottom shelves served as "value zones" for budget shoppers; supplier listing fees, excessive facings, and empty facings undermined allocation. Established display principles remain effective in Mwanza but must adapt to local economic constraints, cultural consumption habits, and operating conditions. Managers should pair prominent displays with price incentives, localize pairings, and move toward data-driven planograms. The perception-based design in four stores supports understanding the mechanisms, not measuring sales effects.

Keywords: *product arrangement; display strategies; sales performance; supermarkets; Stimulus-Organism-Response; Tanzania*

1. Introduction

Supermarket managers in Mwanza City, Tanzania, decide how to arrange and display products mostly on intuition and imitation of larger chains, not on local evidence. This study examines how three display strategies affect sales performance in selected Mwanza supermarkets: end-cap promotions, cross-merchandising and strategic shelf allocation.

Retail is highly competitive, and the physical store is a key point where stimuli shape purchase decisions (Bezawada et al., 2009; Clement et al., 2014; Hanaysha, 2018). Arrangement and display are therefore marketing tools as well as operational tasks (Diederichs & Göbl, 2018; Pratheesh, 2024). Global research shows that shelf-space allocation and product location directly influence sales (Nierop et al., 2006), and that well-designed layouts shape customer movement, the shopping environment and loyalty (Tlapana, 2021). In-store displays can also be more effective than other promotional tools at stimulating sales (Gajanayake & S., 2011; Han et al., 2021).

Supermarkets have expanded across East and Southern Africa, bringing more sophisticated consumers and supply-chain complexity (Nandonde & Kuada, 2016; Phambuka-Nsimbi et al., 2015; Tschirley et al., 2014). African studies stress that retail strategies must be adapted to local market conditions (Mang'unyi & Govender, 2019; McCordic et al., 2022). In Tanzania, supermarkets are increasingly common in Dar es Salaam, Arusha, and Mwanza, but research has focused on broader drivers of consumer choice, such as price, quality, variety, and location (Kambona & Mvungi, 2020; Muya et al., 2022). The closest local evidence concerns street vendors in Mwanza, where clear product visibility increased customer interaction and purchasing (Mwangonela et al., 2025). Formal retail settings remain under-studied.

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Mwanza City is a major commercial Centre in the Lake Zone with a growing supermarket sector. Managers apply end-cap promotions and cross-merchandising, yet a trade report found these practices rely on managerial intuition, anecdote, or imitation of larger chains, with little locally generated evidence of their effect on sales (Oxford Business Group, 2022). Evidence from elsewhere, such as the United Kingdom (Johnson & Peters, 2021) and China (Zhang et al., 2023), comes from markets with higher disposable income and more advanced retail infrastructure, and may not transfer to a context marked by high price sensitivity and distinctive shopping habits (Okafor & Ndubisi, 2021).

This study therefore examines how in-store product arrangement and display strategies affect sales performance in selected supermarkets in Mwanza City, Tanzania. It addresses three questions: how end-cap promotions, cross-merchandising techniques, and strategic shelf allocation influence product sales performance. The study makes three contributions. It provides locally grounded, field-based evidence from a formal retail setting that Tanzanian research has largely overlooked; it applies the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model in a price-sensitive developing market, identifying the shopper-level conditions that decide whether a display attracts or repels buyers; and it gives supermarket managers and trade authorities evidence with which to replace intuition-based and imitative merchandising. The study is confined to formal supermarkets in Mwanza City and excludes other marketing-mix elements, such as pricing and advertising, unless they are directly tied to a display strategy. The remainder of the paper reviews the literature and develops the conceptual framework, describes the methodology, presents the results, and discusses their implications.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1 Key concepts

In-store product arrangement and display strategies are the deliberate placement and presentation of merchandise to attract attention, support evaluation, and stimulate purchase (Kerfoot et al., 2003). Three dimensions are studied here.

- **End-cap promotions** are displays at the ends of aisles, where traffic is high, used for promotional, new, seasonal or high-margin items (Phillips & Bradshaw, 1993). They act as visual cues that raise visibility and recall compared with regular shelf positions (Silva & Giraldi, 2022).
- **Cross-merchandising** places products from different categories together to suggest complementary use and multi-item purchases (Underwood, 2003). Its success depends on how culturally intuitive the pairings are (Okafor & Ndubisi, 2021).
- **Strategic shelf allocation** assigns products to shelf positions by visibility, accessibility and sales potential, including vertical position and number of facings (Dreze et al., 1994).

Sales performance is typically unit sales, revenue or profitability (Breugelmans et al., 2015). Because this study is qualitative, it is understood through managers' perceptions of sales volume, profitability, customer traffic, product performance and perceived volume shifts.

2.2 Theoretical framework: the S-O-R model

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) proposed the Stimulus-Organism-Response model, which replaces a direct stimulus-response link with a mediating internal state. It assumes that people actively process environmental cues; that the organism responds through pleasure, arousal and dominance (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982); and that behavior is bipolar, either approach (staying, exploring, buying) or avoidance (leaving, ignoring) (Bitner, 1992).

The model is flexible and has more explanatory power than simple stimulus-response accounts, and it gives retailers a basis for environmental design (Bagozzi, 1986; Turley & Milliman, 2000). Its limits are a hard-to-measure "black box" organism, little guidance on which internal states matter, a linear causal flow, and context dependence (Bagozzi, 1986; Yan et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2018).

In this study, the display strategies are the stimulus, shoppers' attention, perceived convenience, and purchase intention are the organism, and sales performance is the response. Earlier studies support this logic: Islam et al. (2020) treated eco-labels and signage as stimuli; Wang et al. (2021) showed that crowded or poorly arranged displays can trigger stress and avoidance; and Zhang et al. (2023) linked interactive displays to attention and impulse buying.

2.3 Empirical evidence

End-cap promotions. In a virtual experiment with 400 participants in Brazil, end-cap products had 35% higher recall and stronger purchase intention than shelf products (Silva & Giraldi, 2022). A six-month scanner-data study in Shanghai found static end-caps converted low-cost, fast-moving goods better than digital ones (Zhang et al., 2023). In Nairobi supermarkets, end-caps significantly triggered impulse buying, though the evidence was self-reported (Bara et al., 2021).

Cross-merchandising. Scanner data from 50 South Korean stores showed larger baskets when complementary goods were co-located (Park & Kim, 2023). In Nigeria, pairings cut search time but confused shoppers when they didn't make cultural sense (Okafor & Ndubisi, 2021). Spanish SME retailers gained sales but faced stock-management problems and higher labor costs (Rodriguez & Fernandez, 2024).

Strategic shelf allocation. In UK supermarkets, moving products from bottom shelves to eye level raised sales by 20% (Johnson & Peters, 2021). In South Africa, returns diminished beyond four facings (Nkomo & Velee, 2022). Physical shelf placement remained the dominant driver even when digital pricing displays were added (Chen et al., 2023).

2.4 Research gap

Three gaps follow. The evidence is largely contextual: it comes from high-income, technologically advanced markets,

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leaving price-sensitive settings such as Mwanza under-examined. It is methodological: studies rely on virtual experiments (Silva & Giraldi, 2022; Chen et al., 2023) or self-reported surveys (Bara et al., 2021), with few field studies linking physical store stimuli to local sales realities. And it is geographical: there is little empirical evidence on whether established merchandising principles hold in Tanzanian cities.

2.5 Conceptual framework

Table 1 summarizes the relationships examined. The independent variable is displaying strategy, measured through three dimensions and nine indicators; the dependent variable is sales performance.

Table 1 Conceptual framework: display strategies, indicators and sales performance

Strategy (stimulus)	Indicators
End-cap promotions	Display location; product characteristics; shopper traffic patterns
Cross-merchandising	Thematic grouping; complementary pairing; solution bundling
Strategic shelf allocation	Category adjacency; physical accessibility; visual prominence
Sales performance (response)	Traffic flow of products; product performance; perceived volume shift

Source: Authors' construction from the S-O-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974)

3. Methodology

3.1 Philosophy, approach and design

The study took an interpretivist stance, treating reality as socially constructed and shaped by shared meanings (Saunders et al., 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2022). This fits the research problem, which asks how and why managers arrange displays as they do and how they interpret sales performance. A qualitative approach allowed in-depth exploration of merchandising nuances that numbers alone might miss (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and a descriptive design documented current practice and its perceived effects on sales (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

3.2 Study area and sites

The study was conducted in Mwanza City, on the southern shore of Lake Victoria, a commercial and transport hub for the Lake Zone and Tanzania's second-largest city. We chose it because supermarket managers there reportedly apply display strategies based on intuition (Oxford Business Group, 2022), the supermarket sector is growing, and the city has a customer base with relatively high incomes and tourist traffic.

Four supermarkets were selected: Sitta, Lavena, U-turn, and Protas. Criteria included operating for at least five years, visible use of end-caps, cross-merchandising or varied shelf allocation, high customer traffic, and management willingness to allow interviews and observation.

3.3 Sampling and participants

Criterion-based purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) selected 20 information-rich participants: managers, supervisors, merchandisers and other store operators responsible for, or directly experienced with, display decisions and customer responses. Statistical representativeness was not the aim.

3.4 Data collection

- **Semi-structured interviews** guided by an interview schedule organized around the three objectives were the primary source, with probing of unexpected responses.
- **Non-participant observation** with a checklist recorded end-cap placement, cross-merchandised categories and vertical shelf allocation.
- **Documentary review** covered basic sales records, planogram sketches where available and promotional flyers, to corroborate informants' accounts of sales changes after display changes.

Data were collected in [month(s)] 2026. Because the design was qualitative, variables were not measured on numerical scales. Display strategies were explored through indicators such as end-cap location, product types, pairing types, shelf hierarchy and supplier influence. Sales performance was captured through participants' accounts of sales volume, stock movement, profitability, customer traffic, basket size and customer satisfaction.

3.5 Analysis and trustworthiness

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, combining transcripts with observation notes. Codes were generated inductively, collated into themes, reviewed, named and reported with verbatim quotations.

Trustworthiness followed Lincoln and Guba (1985). For transferability, the context, sites and participants were described in detail. For dependability, an audit trail kept recordings, transcripts, field notes, checklists and coded data. For confirmability, interviews were triangulated with observation and documents, and a reflexive journal recorded the researcher's assumptions.

3.6 Ethics

Ethical clearance came from St. Augustine University of Tanzania, and management of each supermarket granted formal permission. All 20 participants gave verbal and written informed consent and could withdraw at any time. Participants are identified by pseudonyms (for example, Manager A), and sensitive financial or operational weaknesses are reported in aggregate.

4. Results

4.1 Participants and response

All 20 targeted informants took part (100% response rate), five from each of the four supermarkets. They included 11 women and 9 men, with between 1 and 30 years of retail experience; 13 had four or more years. Quotations are labelled

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with participant codes (U = U-turn, P = Protas, S = Sitta, L = Lavena). Three themes emerged for each strategy.

Table 2 Characteristics of participants (n = 20)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Supermarket	Sitta	5	25.0
	Lavena	5	25.0
	U-turn	5	25.0
	Protas	5	25.0
Sex	Female	11	55.0
	Male	9	45.0
Years in retail	1–3	7	35.0
	4–6	7	35.0
	7–10	4	20.0
	Above 10	2	10.0
	Mean (range)	6.7 (1–30)	

Source: Field data (2026)

4.2 End-cap promotions

Display location. Informants agreed that an end-cap's value comes from where it sits on the shopper's route. Successful sites were "landing zones": store entrances, aisle intersections and transitions toward high-draw categories such as produce, bakery and dairy. As one respondent put it, "An end-cap works because it catches people at the exact moment, they are forced to change direction" (U1). End-caps in low-traffic or dead-end aisles performed like ordinary shelves, and observation in two supermarkets showed shoppers passing them without pausing. Clutter near a display also reduced its effect (P2).

Product characteristics. Fast-moving, familiar, affordable staples, such as sugar, cooking oil, small milk sachets and maize flour, sold well on end-caps. Luxury goods, expensive bulk packs and new brands drew curiosity but not purchases. Price was decisive: a display produced sales only when visual appeal was paired with a conspicuous discount or bundle offer, and shoppers who found no saving "stopped, examined the display and then moved on" (L2).

Shopper traffic and time. The sales lift from a new end-cap peaked within three to four days and faded by the second week (P3). Some stores therefore rotated end-cap items weekly, and replenishment records showed sharp early drawdowns followed by slower movement. Traffic density also mattered: evening rush and holiday crowds shortened or blocked attention, while slower periods such as mid-morning and around payday allowed shoppers to read and stop.

4.3 Cross-merchandising

Thematic grouping. Themes sold when built on local routines and calendars. A "Chai Time" grouping of tea, sugar, milk and mandazi, and harvest and Ramadan themes, drew deliberate stopping and multi-item picking, while imported themes such as "Western Breakfast" and "Healthy Living" stagnated. In one manager's words, "A local theme starts the shopping in the customer's head before they reach the shelf" (L4).

Complementary pairing. Pairing raised basket size and convenience by sparing shoppers a trip to a second aisle, but only when culturally intuitive. Maize flour beside traditional vegetables, rice with beans, bleach with toilet cleaner and diapers with wipes worked; pasta with sauce, wine with cheese and lotion with perfume did not. Participants described the working pairings as an "automatic connection."

Solution bundling. None of the four supermarkets had automated inventory systems, so replenishing bundles assembled from several departments was labor-intensive and secondary displays were often left empty (S5). One bundle sold out on day one, but assembling it took two staff members an hour each morning and "the labor cost ate the profit." Bundles with unclear combined prices bred suspicion, while clearly labelled prices converted hesitation into purchase (L3, P4).

4.4 Strategic shelf allocation

Category adjacency. Culturally logical sequences, such as canned goods together or staples in the order shoppers expect, supported flow, while forced or illogical placements caused frustration and early aisle exit (S1). Observation showed longer dwell times, more completed selections and fewer requests for staff help in aisles with coherent sequences.

Physical accessibility. The "eye-level is buy-level" principle was confirmed: eye-level space earned the highest turnover and was reserved for high-margin branded goods. A local adaptation turned bottom shelves into "value zones" for bulk, low-cost items, serving budget-conscious shoppers willing to bend for a lower price. Security, safety and elderly shoppers also shaped placement of high-value, breakable and heavy items. Respondents in three of four supermarkets said supplier listing fees distorted allocation, with large manufacturers buying eye-level facings that displaced faster-selling local goods (S1).

Visual prominence. Moving from one to two or three facings raised visibility and sales (P5), but beyond that range shoppers grew suspicious of a product that was "everywhere." Empty facings were read as poor stock management, and shoppers sometimes abandoned the category; stockouts at premium positions appeared in stock records. "An empty eye-level facing was worse than no facing at all" (L3).

4.5 Other issues

Three further issues arose. Shoppers focused on a list bypassed displays ("selective navigation") or blocked access

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while deliberating ("product guarding"). None of the stores could track the return on investment of displays at product level. And cross-merchandising perishables with non-perishables increased spoilage.

Table 3 Summary of themes and supporting evidence

Strategy	Theme	Main finding	Evidence
End-cap promotions	Display location	Effective at landing zones where shoppers change direction; dead-end sites act as ordinary shelves	Interviews (U1, P2); observation in two supermarkets
End-cap promotions	Product characteristics	Familiar, low-cost staples sell; luxury and new brands do not; a visible discount is needed	Interviews (S3, L2)
End-cap promotions	Traffic and time	Lift peaks within 3–4 days and fades by week 2, so rotation is needed	Interviews (P3); replenishment records
Cross-merchandising	Thematic grouping	Local themes (Chai Time, harvest, Ramadan) sell; imported themes stagnate	Interviews (S2, L4); observation
Cross-merchandising	Complementary pairing	Culturally intuitive pairings enlarge baskets; Western pairings confuse	Interviews (U2); observation and records
Cross-merchandising	Solution bundling	Manual replenishment leaves secondary displays empty; unlabeled prices breed suspicion	Interviews (S5, L3, P4); stock records
Shelf allocation	Category adjacency	Culturally logical sequences support flow; illogical placement causes early aisle exit	Interviews (S1); observation
Shelf allocation	Physical accessibility	Eye level for high-margin goods; bottom shelves as value zones; supplier listing fees distort allocation	Interviews (S1)
Shelf allocation	Visual prominence	Sales rise to two or three facings, then suspicion; empty facings signal poor management	Interviews (P5, L3); stock records

Source: Field data (2026)

5. Discussion

Established merchandising principles hold in Mwanza, but each works only through the shopper's local economic and cultural evaluation of the display. Below, findings are set against the literature and read through the S-O-R model.

5.1 Findings against the literature

End-caps. The landing-zone finding agrees with Silva and Giraldi (2022), who found higher recall for end-cap products, and with Bara et al. (2021), who linked end-cap visibility to impulse buying in Nairobi. It qualifies both: visibility matters only where it coincides with traffic, and a highly visible end-cap in a dead-end aisle failed. The success of low-cost staples agrees with Zhang et al. (2023), who found static displays converted low-cost, fast-moving goods best. It contradicts the suggestion that end-caps suit new-product launches (Silva & Giraldi, 2022): in Mwanza, unfamiliar brands and luxury goods failed, and attention converted only alongside a perceived price incentive. A virtual recall experiment cannot capture the budget constraint that separates remembering a product from buying it.

Cross-merchandising. Basket enlargement agrees with Park and Kim (2023), but complementarity proved to depend on the shopper's culture and budget, not on the products alone. The cultural-intuitiveness condition replicates Okafor and Ndubisi (2021) and supplies the category-specific examples they called for, such as maize flour with vegetables as against pasta with sauce. The labor and stock burden matches Rodriguez and Fernandez (2024) but was heavier where there was no digital inventory system, and shopper distrust of unlabeled bundle prices adds an external cost the Spanish study did not report.

Shelf allocation. Eye-level dominance agrees with Johnson and Peters (2021). The bottom-shelf "value zone" qualifies the assumption that maximum accessibility maximizes sales: harder access acted as an informal segmentation filter that served budget-conscious shoppers. The facings threshold agrees with the diminishing returns reported by Nkomo and Velee (2022), and adds a credibility explanation, since excess prominence reads as manipulation. The dominance of physical allocation agrees with Chen et al. (2023). Supplier listing fees are the clearest contribution beyond this literature, because they show that the shelf shoppers actually see is often a negotiated outcome rather than a demand-optimized design.

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5.2 Theoretical implications

The S-O-R assumptions were supported in three ways. First, shoppers acted as active processors: identical displays produced opposite outcomes depending on whether the shopper perceived economic value, so the difference lay in the organism, not the stimulus. Second, pleasure, arousal and dominance each appeared. Pleasure came from a completed meal plan or a perceived saving, so in a price-sensitive market it was economic as much as hedonic. Arousal was novelty-bound and decayed within about two weeks, which is why rotation renews it. Dominance appeared as navigational confidence in logical aisles and as trust in transparently priced bundles. Third, behavior was bipolar, and the switch between approach and avoidance depended on organism-level conditions: perceived value, cultural recognition and perceived control.

Table 4 Mapping of findings onto the S-O-R model

Strategy (stimulus)	Theme	Organism state	Response
End-cap promotions	Display location	Attention and arousal at interception points	Stopping, handling, purchase
End-cap promotions	Product characteristics	Perceived economic value; novelty arousal	Purchase or avoidance
Cross-merchandising	Thematic grouping	Cultural recognition or dissonance	Multi-item picking or ignoring
Cross-merchandising	Complementary pairing	Reduced effort; pleasure of a completed plan	Dual purchase or confusion
Cross-merchandising	Solution bundling	Perceived control and trust	Purchase or suspicion
Shelf allocation	Category adjacency	Navigational confidence	Aisle completion or early exit
Shelf allocation	Physical accessibility	Value-effort trade-off by segment	High-margin eye-level or bulk value-zone purchase
Shelf allocation	Visual prominence	Confidence or suspicion	Purchase up to a threshold, avoidance beyond it or at empty facings

Source: Authors' analysis of field data (2026)

5.3 Practical implications

Because the study is qualitative and perception-based, its implications are practices to pilot and test, not proven interventions. Managers and owners can pair every end-cap with a visible price incentive, reserve end-caps for familiar staples and rotate products before novelty fades, in some stores weekly. Cross-merchandised pairings and themes can be built around local meals, religious calendars and harvest seasons, with bundle prices labelled clearly. Bottom shelves can be used deliberately as value zones, and promoted facings kept stocked. Inventory tracking that covers secondary display locations, and product-level records of display returns, would support a gradual move from intuition to data-driven planograms. Trade authorities could consider guidelines on supplier listing fees and shelf allocation, together with retail training in basic data management and record-keeping.

6. Conclusion

In Mwanza supermarkets, display strategies raise sales only when they match local price sensitivity, culture and operating conditions. End-caps work as stimuli but not automatically: they need a landing-zone location, familiar low-cost staples, a visible price incentive and frequent rotation, because the effect fades within about two weeks. Cross-merchandising works when pairings and themes mirror local routines, but it carries real labor and stock costs where inventory is manual. Shelf allocation acts as a dual targeting system, with eye level for high-margin sales and bottom-shelf value zones for budget shoppers, though supplier listing fees compromise retailers' control and over-prominence or empty facings erode trust.

Merchandising theory built in high-income, technologically advanced markets cannot simply be transplanted to Tanzanian retail. The way forward is evidence-based localization.

The study relies on managers' and staff perceptions, observation and documents rather than scanner data, so findings describe perceived, not precisely measured, sales changes. It covers four supermarkets in one city and is not statistically generalizable to other regions, rural areas or informal retail. Perceptions also reflect conditions at the time of data collection, which inflation, supply shocks, and changing shopper behavior may alter.

Future work should use a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design that measures the sales lift of specific end-caps and pairings from scanner data and then explains variations through interviews. It should also examine how pricing, distribution logistics, and in-store promotion interact with visual merchandising.

Declarations

Ethical approval: St. Augustine University of Tanzania approved the study 0009-0003-3837-0170 and each participating supermarket's management granted formal

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permission. Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability: De-identified data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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