

A Study of Visual Merchandising Elements in Fashion Retail Stores and their impact on Customer behaviour

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is the outcome of a study of Visual Merchandising Elements of an apparel retail store and their impact on behaviour of customers. It is an attempt to identify the most appealing elements of VM. The general purpose of Visual Merchandising is to attract, invite, educate and motivate the customers to purchase merchandise being sold in the store. Visual Merchandising Elements have been categorised into two major segments: External VM Elements and Interior VM Elements. Exterior VME comprises of Graphics & Signages, Window Display setting, Merchandise presentation, Parking facility, Brand name & logo and Façade of the store. However Interior VME comprises of Store layout, theme, color, music, temperature, lighting, mannequin styling, product display, cleanliness, Furniture, Smell, Cash Counter, Floor directory and Trial room. For this study on impact of above mentioned VME, four leading MBOs of India were selected which are Fashion at Big Bazar (FBB), Lifestyle, Shoppers stop and Reliance Trends. All these four retailers are department stores dealing into multiple brands, offer both apparels and accessories and have presence pan India through their multiple outlets in various cities. The Store size and offered brands and merchandise quantity being similar in all the stores of these brands make them perfect competitors targeting the same customer group. Hence Visual Merchandising of these stores is comparable. Secondary data was used for formulating list of VME and primary data was collected from 500 samples, to study impact of these VME through self-developed and self-administered questionnaire. The Likert scale was used to record the level of influence of VME from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'. Collected data was analysed and it was found that 80% sample agreed with the influence of VME on their behaviour. Also the most influencing External VMEs were found to be Window Display setting and Merchandise on Display. On the other hand, the most influencing Internal VMEs were found to be creative product display and mannequin styling.

Key Words: Visual Merchandising, Visual Merchandising Elements, Customer behaviour, Window Display, Mannequins, VM, VME.

I INTRODUCTION

(a) Understanding Indian Retail Environment-

The Indian retail sector has experienced fastest growth over last few years achieving a total market size of USD 672 billion in 2017. The Indian retail market is projected to reach USD 1200 billion by 2021. While on the other hand, Indian e-commerce industry at the current growth rate of 31%, is expected to reach USD 60 billion, by 2020. India was Ranked No. 1 in A.T. Kearney's Global Retail Development Index (GRDI) in 2017, according to IBEF: India Retail Industry Report. Retail is India's largest industry, currently accounting for over 10% of the country's GDP and 8% of total employment, according to Investindia (2019). The government of India has allowed 51 % FDI in multi-brand retail and 100 % in single brand retail, according to recent FDI Policy (2017). Indian retail sector is comprised of organised and unorganised retail, where the unorganised retail market contributes 92% of the total retail sector in India. Retailing could simply be defined as "Breaking the bulk". According to Upadhyay et.al. (2017), Retailing is

different from whole-selling, where large amount of products are sold to few customers, however in retailing small quantity of products are sold to large number of customers.

- (b) **Understanding Visual Merchandising** - Visual Merchandising helps customers to have an amazing shopping experience (Upadhyay et. al. 2018). For a Visual Merchandiser, a store is like a theatre. The walls & floor are like stage of theatre. The lighting, fixtures & visual communications makes the set of the stage & the merchandise plays the characters in the show (Upadhyay et.al. 2017). Visual Merchandising is the art of presentation, which puts the merchandise in focus. It educates the customers, creates desire and finally augments the selling process (Mohan & Ojha, 2014)
- (c) **Understanding Visual Merchandising Elements** - Kotler, P.(1974) discussed shopping atmosphere and how a customer experience through a combination of such atmospheric elements like visual, sound, tactile and olfactory elements, which ultimately stimulate emotional reactions and influence buying behaviour (Fig. 1).

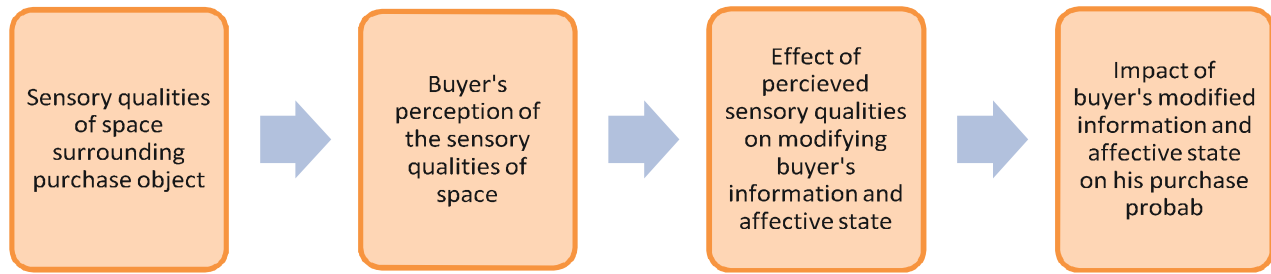


Fig. 1: Step by step process of buyers' purchase decision based on atmospheric elements

Source: Kotler, P. 1974, p.54

Kotler also considered these store atmospheric elements as part of Visual Merchandising. The primary job of these visual merchandising attributes and elements is to highlight products of a store so as

to attract the customers and stimulate the selling process (Pegler, 2011)

Visual merchandising elements can be categorised as follows:

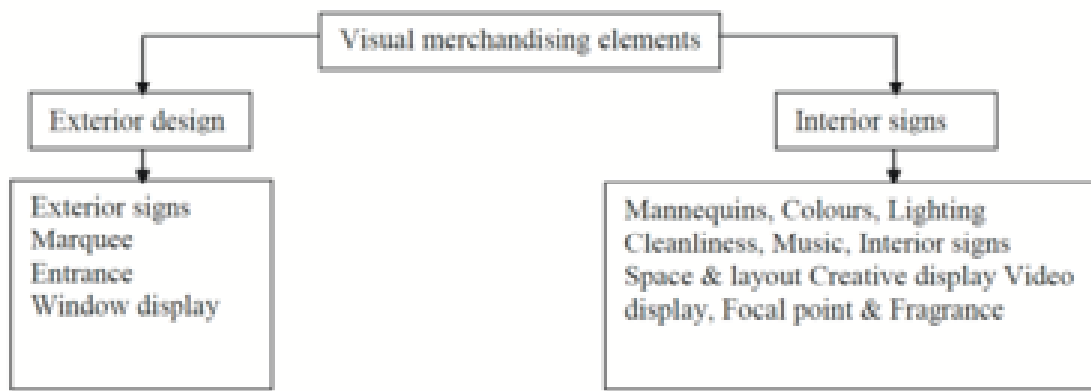


Fig. 2: Visual Merchandising Elements

The primary reason for conducting this research is to study all possible visual merchandising elements, as suggested by various authors, academicians & practitioners and to assess them for their effectiveness and preference.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

Kotler (1973) defined store atmospherics as store environment aimed to affect consumers' responses and influence their buying behaviour. Atmospherics, being an important marketing tool, attracted many researchers who studied its impact on consumer buying behaviour (Kotler, 1973; Manganari, et al., 2011).

Donovan and Rossiter (1982) and Matilla and Witz (2008) further categorised store attributes into two major areas – Store exterior and store interior. Berman and Evans (1989), divide store VM elements into four categories: the exterior (storefront, entrances, display windows, physical characteristics of the building (e.g. height and size), surrounding area, and parking), the interior (flooring, colours, lighting, scents, sounds, fixtures, temperature, merchandise, and cleanliness), layout and design (the allocation of floor space), and point-of-purchase

(displays, signs, wall decorations, certifications, pictures and artwork, price and product displays).

Turley and Milliman (2000) added one more element: human variables which mean influence of other shoppers and retail employees. They also examined influence of these atmospheric variables on consumers' shopping time, approach-avoidance and purchasing behaviour, which resulted that retail atmospherics such as colour, music, lighting and retail salespeople can have a great influence on consumers' purchasing and approach-avoidance behaviour. Other researchers found relationship between store atmospheric cues and consumers' emotions and their perception of the store (Chebat&Michon, 2003). Ambient odour could positively influence shoppers' perceptions and affect shopping behaviour (Michon, Chebat& Turley, 2005). In-store music can also increase store loyalty (Walsh et al., 2011).

Earlier, Baker et. al (1992) found a positive impact of lighting and background music on customers' purchase intention. Crowley (1993) added worked on another element-color and concluded with influence on consumers' evaluation and activation. Later, Fiore et. al. (2000) also confirmed that scents and fragrance in a store stimulate emotional state which can lead to purchase intention. Impact of color and lighting on

consumers’ purchase intention was also confirmed by Babinet. al. (2003). Aesthetic atmosphereChandonet. al. (2009),Store lighting(Aspfors, 2010), shelf arrangement(Hoch and Purk, 2000), window display (Davis and Tilley, 2004), Color, seating arrangements, props, fixtures and signage (Yun and Good, 2007).and cleanliness (Carpenter and Moore, 2006) was suggested as tools used by retailers to enhance the store image in the minds of customers. Pillai et. al. (2011), established that Visual Merchandising techniques, can convert store visitors into buyers.Razzouket. al. (2001) and Mopidevi and Lolla (2013) established that with window display, a retailer can build image and stand out in the market. However, Kim (2013) does not agree with this statement about window displays as no researcher has ever proved its effectiveness,but only increment is registered in impulse buying (Bashar and Ahmed, 2012). Garauset. al. (2015) established that store layout should be designed so as to hold the customer in the store for a longer duration and let him enjoy the shopping experience.

Singh et. al. (2014) used Likert’s 5 point scale technique to check about effectiveness of 25 store attributes which were bundled into 7 major factors. They realized that attributes like window display, fixture, planogram, signage on gondola and merchandise assortment affects customers’ buying pattern. However their study included attributes like price points, exchange policy, grievance handling etc. which cannot be counted under elements of visual merchandising.

Kleinoaet. al. (2015) focused on first impression, wall’s texture, lighting, interior decoration, dishes offered, layout, aroma, music, staff dress code, POS material, temperature and noise, for a survey on 20 restaurants of Nitra region of Slovak Republic. They found that the best rated elements include temperature, noise and dishes offered from the menu. However, they failed to understand that, dishes of a restaurant, being product of the store, cannot be an element of visual merchandising. This research also resulted that background music is the only VM element with least impact on customer.

Rathnayaka and Madhuhansi (2017), studied only four elements of Visual Merchandising – Promotional signage, Music, Layout and Aroma and identified their influence on purchase intention. Soomroet. al. (2017) focused on four important factors of visual merchandising – store layout, window display, color& lighting and store interior and found that except store layout, all other factors have a positive impact on customers’ attention. However, they failed to establish the basis of selecting only four elements of visual merchandising. Also all the questions of the questionnaire were affirmative in nature and suggested the respondents to reply with a ‘Yes’. This biased questionnaire and hence its result cannot be considered reliable.

III RESEARCH METHOD

(a) **Procedure and the work plan** - The proposed methodology is shown in Figure 2. First, a comprehensive literature review was carried out, to understand the concepts and find the research gap. Then data sources, data collection methods and the data analysis methods were decided.

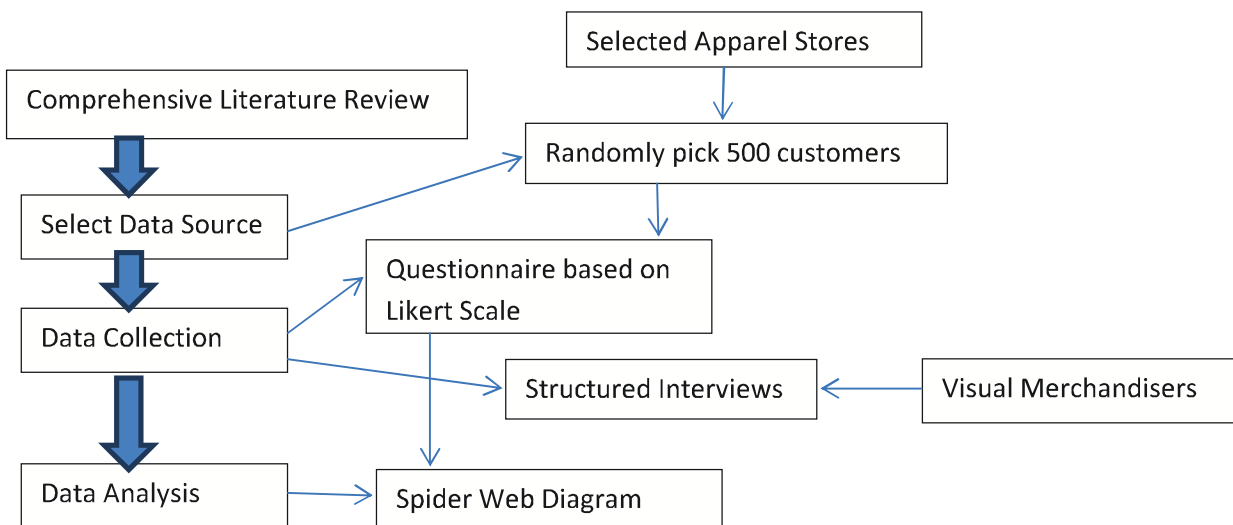


Fig. 3: Proposed methodology in sequence

(b) **Research Gap:** Having gone through the previous researches, it was discovered that there is no comprehensive list of VM elements and none of the researchers have ever dealt with all of them and tried to find their impact on Customers' buying behaviour. It was also found that few researchers have taken wrong attributes under consideration which could have confused respondents. It was also noticed that customers' response to any VM attribute could be for that store where the response was recorded. Such biased responses cannot be generalised and accepted in general for all the retail stores.

(c) **Research Model Developed:** To carry out the research, four leading Apparel retailers were selected, namely Shoppers Stop, Lifestyle, Fashion at Big Bazar (FBB) and Reliance Trends. Outlets of these retailers were visited at Bhopal, Mumbai and Bangalore in India. VM elements used by these retailers were identified and recorded under consultation with their Visual Merchandisers. 125 customers from each of these retailers were picked randomly for getting the data collected through questionnaire.

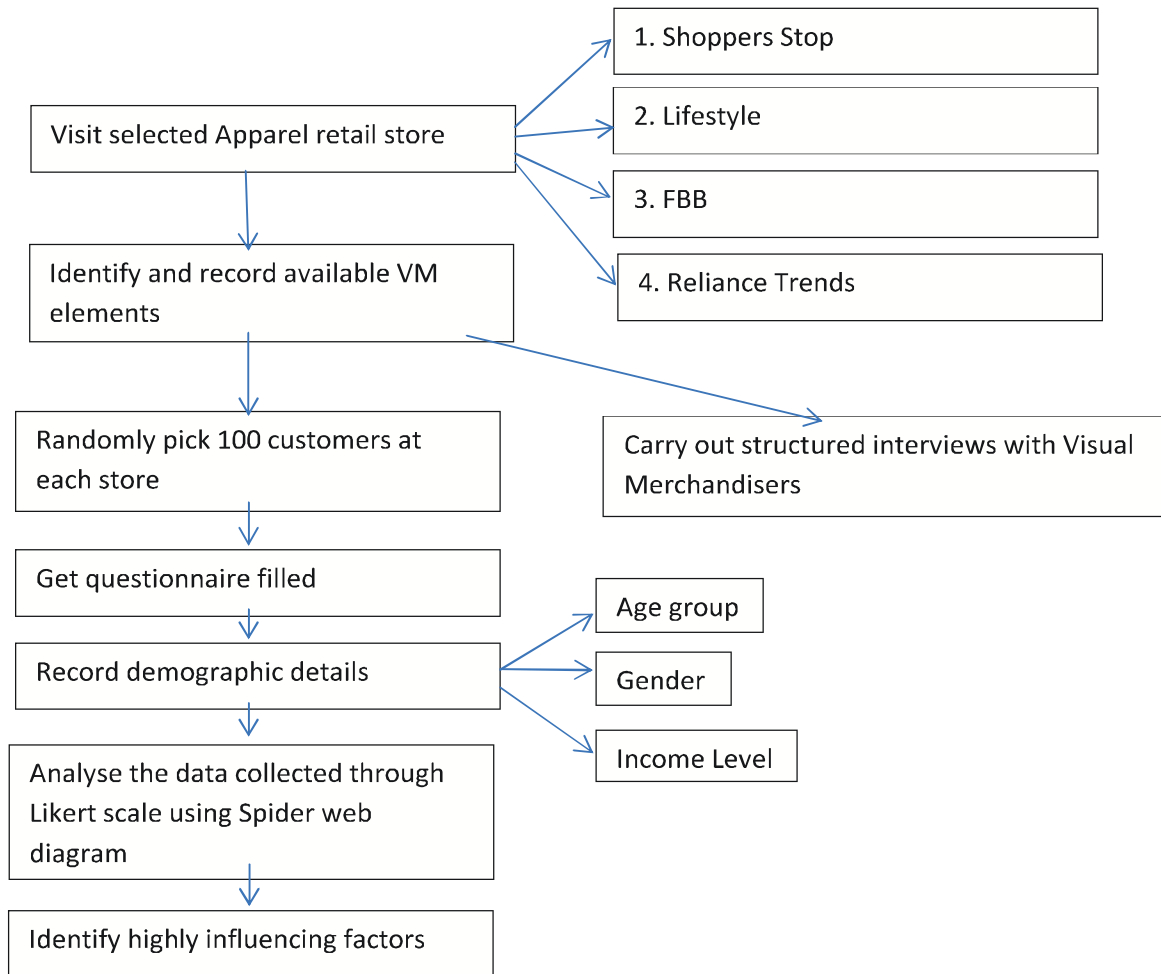


Fig. 4: Comprehensive work plan for research project

(d) **Research design:** The research design is divided into two parts, the first part is **Exploratory** in nature and the second part is **Descriptive**. In the first part, Visual Merchandisers and other retailers like Marketing / Sales Managers of the chosen four retail brands at three chosen cities were interviewed to understand the dimensions of VM Elements.

(e) **Method of Data Collection:** Quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire based survey which was self-developed and self-monitored as per requirements and objectives of the study.

(f) **Sample Size & Sampling Technique:** Since there is no information available regarding population of customers visiting the stores under study and also proportion of customers getting influenced by Visual Merchandising, hence the proportion of customers getting influenced by VM vis-à-vis those are not getting influenced by VM is taken as 50:50.

The method used for the sample size from proportion to estimate exact sample size.

$$S = [Z^2 P (1-P)]/d^2$$

Following are the values for the equation

$$Z (Z \text{ VALUE}) = 1.96$$

P (Proportion value) = 0.5
 D (Precision Level) = 0.05

Hence, the minimum sample size for this research stood at 385. To maintain the quality of research, the sample size is chosen as 500.

The sampling technique used was **Non-Probability** using **Mall Intercept Method** as customers who had purchased from the retail outlet were surveyed as they moved out of the store irrespective of whether they have purchased anything or not, since our study is not limited to just buying behaviour. Also respondents were chosen on the basis of **Convenience** of researcher.

- (g) **Instrument of Data Collection:** Secondary data in the form of publications and research dedicated in the area of VM elements and their impact was taken into consideration. Primary Data was collected using close ended

questionnaire for customers and instrument was distributed randomly. Interviews with Visual Merchandisers / retailers helped in listing out and understanding scope of VM elements and also for analysis of collected data post survey. Use of respondents' data was limited for research and ethical purpose only.

- (h) **Analytical tool:** Data was analysed graphically using pie-charts and spider web chart. A Spider web graph is a two dimensional chart method of representing multivariate data of three or more quantitative variables. In such graphs, a point near the centre represents low value whereas a point near the edge represents high value.

IV ANALYSIS AND RESULT

Responses collected from 500 customers across all the four retail brands stores in three different cities, is given in the table below:

Table 1
Most influencing feature driving shopper inside the store

Most influencing feature driving shoppers inside the store	Exterior Graphics & signage	Window Display Setting	Store Façade	Merchandise on Display	Brand name and logo	Parking facility
Count	60	125	65	120	75	55

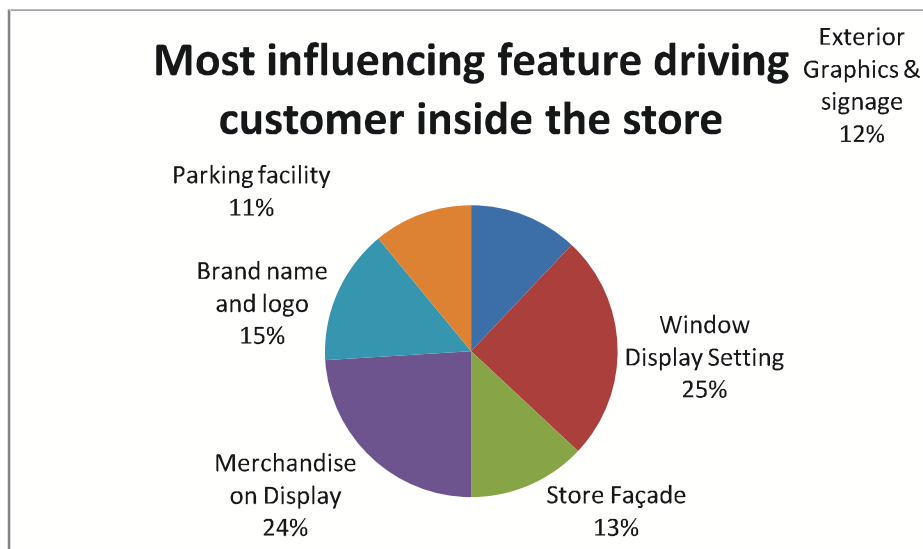


Fig. 5: Analysis of responses for external VM attributes

Table 2
Ranking order of External VM features based on response at Table 1

Rank	External VM Attribute
1	Window Display Setting
2	Merchandise on Display
3	Brand Name and Logo
4	Store Façade
5	Exterior Graphics and Signage
6	Parking Facility

The pie-chart diagram above explains that customers have diversified choices with respect to driving factors. However, the most influential features of external VM elements were found to be Window Display setting and Merchandise on Display. This means that Window Display is the most impactful characteristic of a store image which invite customers inside the store. There are other characteristics too which could be important for few and not for others. Brand name and logo was the third highest impactful attribute which means customers tend to walk inside a store of a trusted brand and they identify its outlets by its brand name and logo. This group of respondents do not get affected by VM attributes of other stores and have chosen this attribute as the most influencing factor for them to walk in a store. This also means that these customers are

brand loyal and do not get diverted with attractive offers and displays by other brands. The fourth highest rated attribute is store façade. This means that this set of respondents / customers are influenced by store’s outer appearance, building size, color and entrance. These sub elements of Store Façade helps these customers to make a perception about the store’s offerings. The least rated attribute was found to be Parking facility, which was chosen by around 10% of respondents. This means that only customers with own car / vehicle faced with the problem of parking their vehicle and this makes them to choose a store where they are provided with such facility. Other respondents either choose public transport or a cab to reach the store and hence they didn’t get affected with parking issue.

Table 3
Most noticed feature inside store

Most noticed feature inside store	Layout	Theme	Color	Music	Lighting	Mannequin	Display	Cleanliness	Temperature	Furniture	Smell	Cash Counter	Floor directory	Trial Room
Count	0	0	0	48	68	87	95	65	0	0	0	70	0	67

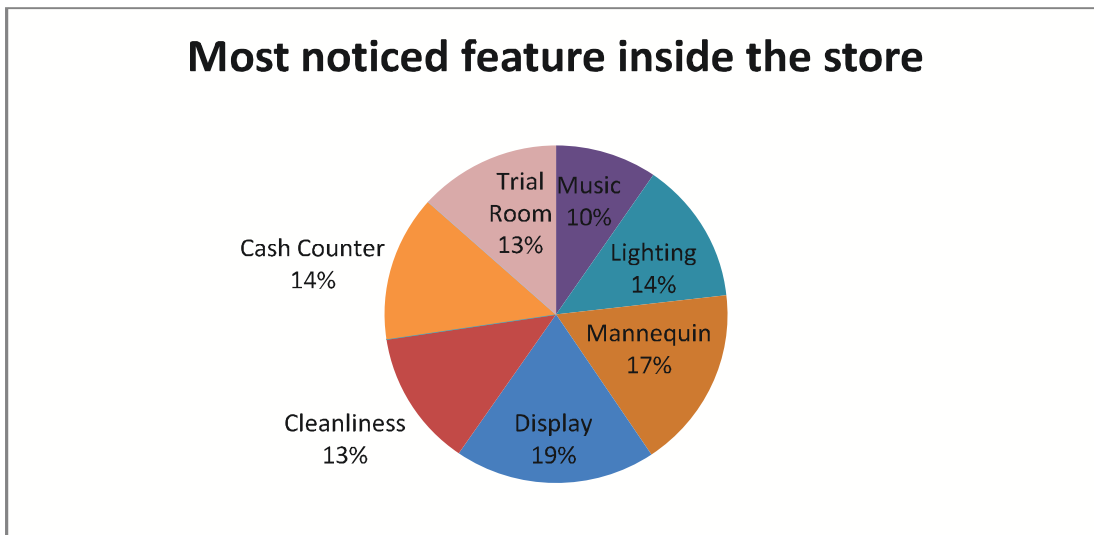


Fig. 6: Analysis of responses for Internal VM attributes

Table 4
Ranking order of Internal VM features based on response at Table 3

Rank	Internal VM Attribute
1	Creative Product Display
2	Mannequin styling
3	Cash Counter and Lighting
4	Cleanliness and Trial Room
5	Music
6	Store Layout, Interior Theme, Color, Temperature, Furniture, Smell and Floor Directory

The most noticed features inside a store were found to be Display and Mannequins. This could have aroused from recent experiments by Shoppers Stop and Lifestyle with innovative mannequins and display techniques. And also since mannequins give an idea about the garments look and fit, which makes the customers to notice the garment and mannequin more than other VM attributes. The other important attributes were cleanliness in the store; trail rooms and cash counter where customers spend a considerable amount of time and happen to notice them. Availability of trial rooms can even make or break a selling opportunity. There are customers who restrict themselves to buy garments without trying them, in spite of store's return / exchange policies. Cash counter is a place where customers might have to wait in a que for their turn to billing process. Its frequency and duration may vary with season, day of the week and hour of the day. Generally there is huge crowd during sale and festive season. Also customers might have to wait in que on weekends and evening hours of the day. Here waiting in the que is not that important with respect to VM elements. On the contrary, the most important feature about cash counters is its impact on impulse purchase. Retailers

tend to put some items near cash counters, to be noticed and tempted by customers while they are waiting in the Que. This leads to impulse buying and there by sales of the store. Music was found to be least noticed feature inside the store but it does not mean it is the least important too. Actually impact of Music and lighting is more of psychological than physiological. Customers might be enjoying the music and thereby the shopping experience without noticing that it is the music which made them feel good. However the attributes of music and lighting were not completely rejected which means that these attributes attracted customers' attention, made a remark and registered their presence.

Other internal attributes of a store like layout, theme, color, temperature, furniture, smell and floor directory could not get a single response in this survey. However this does not mean that these attributes lack importance as the question was for the most noticed feature. This means that these attributes were definitely not the most noticed ne but could be of considerable importance to customers and anyway all these elements of the store, collectively helps to build up the store image.

Table 5
Level of agreement on impact of VM elements

Attributes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Exterior Signage	50	195	200	55	0
Façade	232	260	8	0	0
Parking lot	175	163	140	22	0
Window Display	405	95	0	0	0
Merchandise Presentation	255	237	8	0	0
Brand Name and logo	50	220	230	0	0
Furniture	70	167	163	100	0
Music	165	235	80	20	0
Lighting	312	188	0	0	0
Temperature	170	300	30	0	0
Cleanliness	270	230	0	0	0
Smell	255	210	35	0	0
Cluster Displays	270	230	0	0	0
Color Blocking	387	113	0	0	0
POS	70	200	210	20	0
Price tag	320	120	50	10	0
Trail Room	305	106	39	50	0
Mannequin	378	122	0	0	0
Interior Signage	217	283	0	0	0
Store layout	137	210	128	25	0
Total Responses	4493	3884	1321	302	0
Percentage	45%	39%	13%	3%	0%

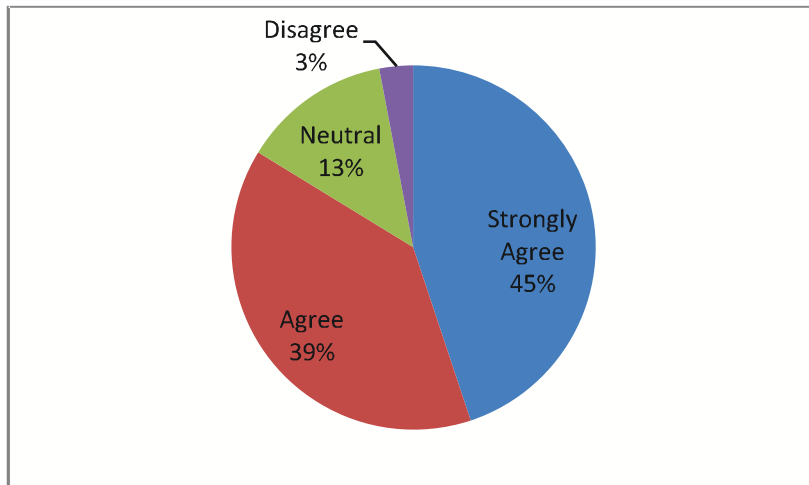


Fig. 7: Pie chart- Response distribution of sample

Total responses of 500 samples were analysed to check the impact of VM elements on behaviour of customers. The Pie-chart distribution above shows that 84% of the total responses are either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' which proves a positive impact of VM elements on customer behaviour. 13% of response was 'Neutral' which could be because

respondent was not aware of the impact of that VM element. Out of total responses of 500 respondents, "Strongly Disagree" was not noted even once. The above data was plotted in spider-web diagram to clearly demonstrate the highly influential VM elements.

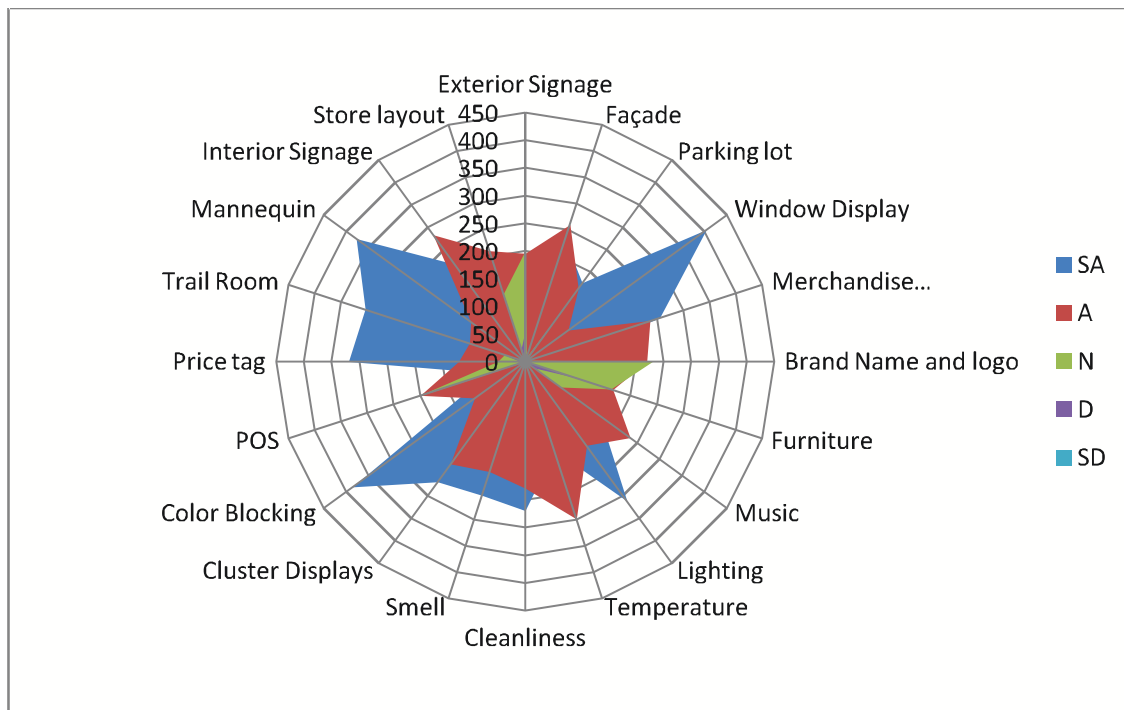


Fig. 8: Spider-Web diagram - showing number of responses on impact of VM elements

The graph and the table above, clearly indicates that Window display, Color blocking and mannequins are the most influential elements on consumer buying behaviour. Lighting and use of Price tags also found to be of great impact which might be because customers are price sensitive.

(a) Gender Information:

- (i) Gender information graph below shows that 73% of sample respondents were Female and only 27% respondents were male, who buy apparels from the stores under study. Hence these stores should target and arrange the VM of the store so as to attract and influence women customers.

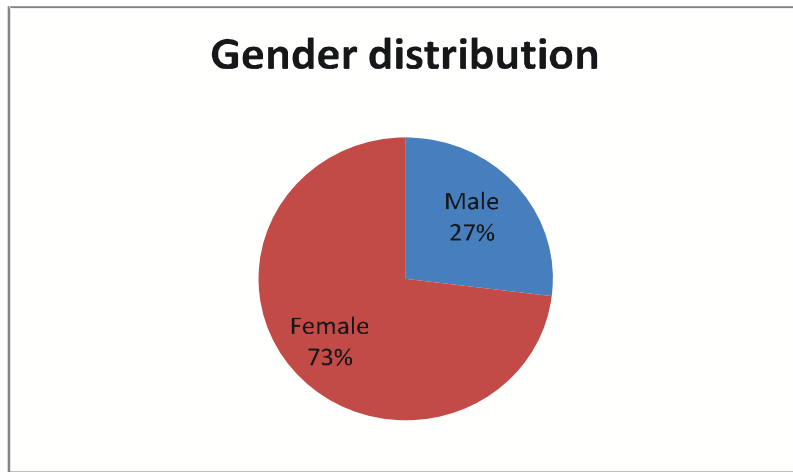


Figure no. 9: Analysis of Gender Information of the sample

(b) Age Group Information:

The graph below show that majority of respondents belong to the age group of 30-40 years where as almost equal percentage of respondents belonged to the age group of 20-30

years. However we have a small percentage of samples (6%) with age of 50 years and above. Hence these retail stores should focus on the age group of 20 to 40 years.

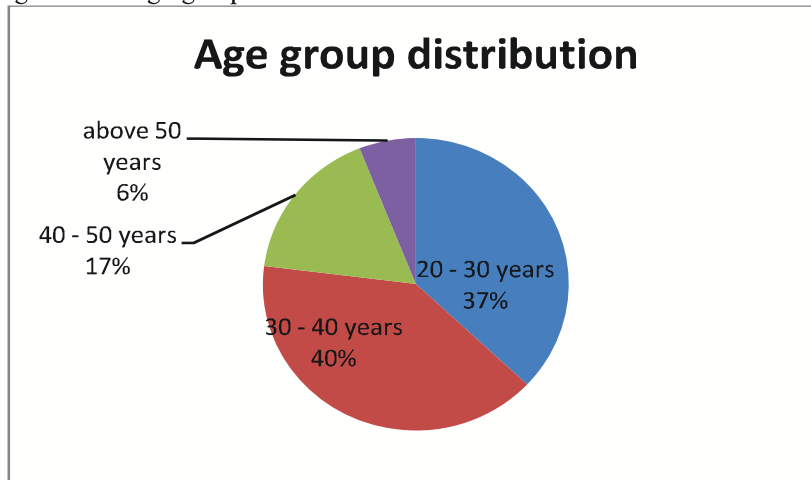


Fig. 10: Age group distribution of sample

(c) Occupation Information: A major portion of sample respondents either have a job or a business and are earning through it, however an equally big portion of respondents were student which means their expenses are being taken care

by either their parents or guardians. A little less population belonged to 'unemployed' yet not students form the 15% population of the samples under study.

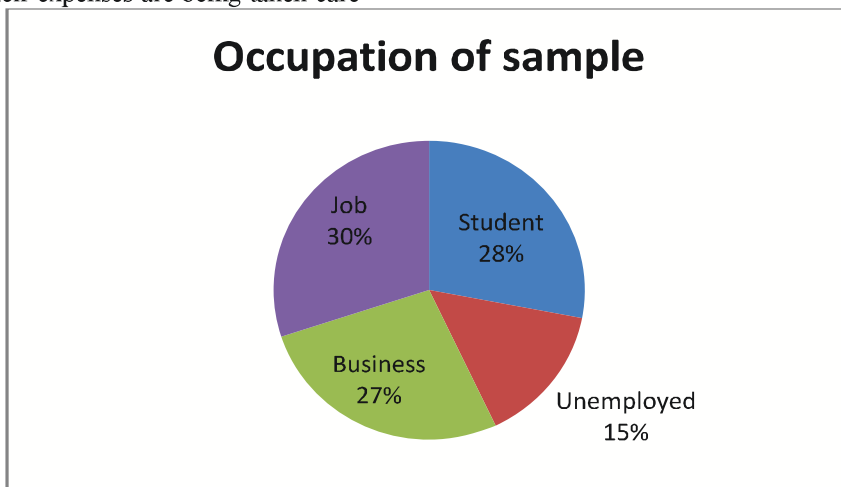


Fig. 11: Occupation information of sample

(d) **Family Income Information:** The graph below shows that majority of respondents have an annual family income from 5 to 10 lacs and above 10 lacs. This is because these stores are

premium retailers which sell on MRP and occasional discounts. Hence, if this bracket of high income customers is targeted well, sales can be increased dramatically.

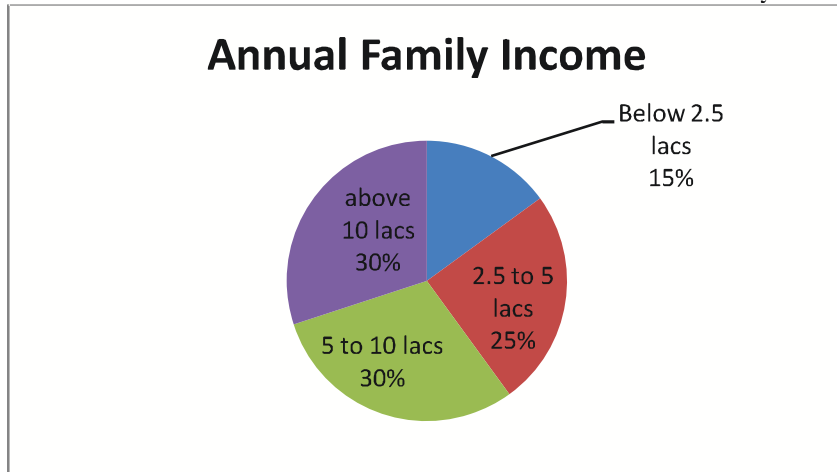


Fig. 12: Annual family income information of sample

(e) **Education Information:** 80% of samples were found to be Graduate and above.

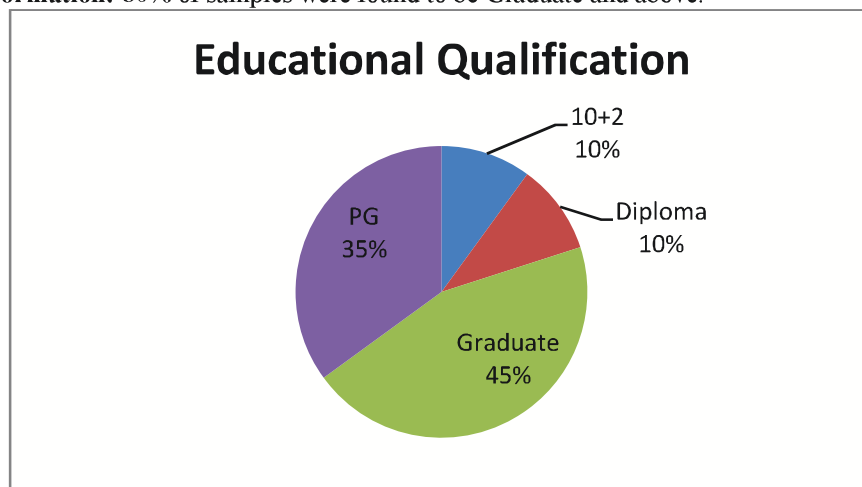


Fig. 13: Educational Qualification of sample

(d) **Frequency of visit to the store:** 41% of samples visit the store every month. And 38% of samples visit the store once in three month. However,

apart from VM frequency of visit also depends on festivals, vacations, seasons and availability of new merchandise in the store.

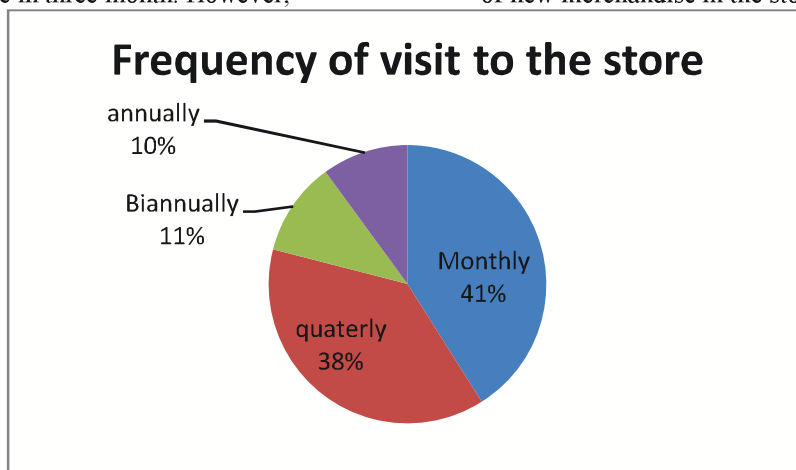


Fig. 14: Frequency distribution of visit to the store

(e) **Expenditure per visit:** The average expenditure per visit of 43% of samples was found to be below Rs. 2000. This bracket of customers can be made to spend more by using sales promotion

schemes. VM can also help in increasing the bill value by suggesting mix and match options of apparels and accessories and impulse sales.

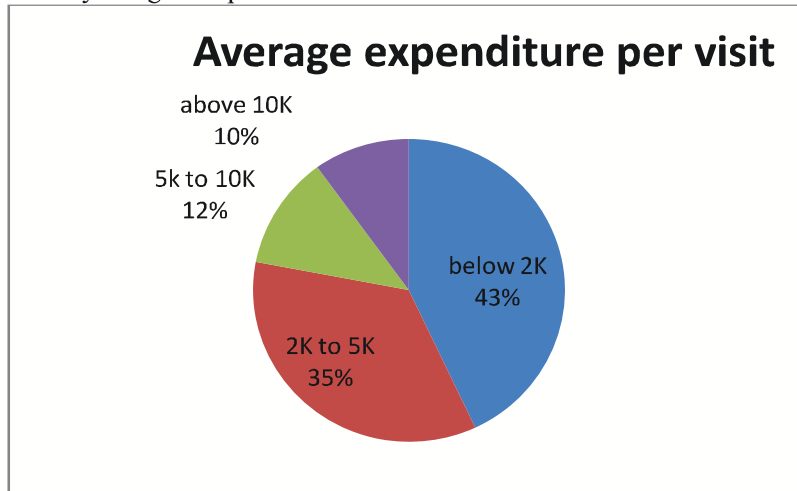


Fig. 15: Average expenditure of samples per store visit

V RECOMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

The highly effective or influential visual merchandising elements of apparel retail stores were found to be Window Display, Color blocking, Mannequins, Lighting and use of Price tags. Taking these highly influential factors into account, it is recommended that:

- (a) Retailers should concentrate more on creative and interesting window displays at the store front, which could attract attention of passers-by, build a positive brand image and invite them inside the store. Since mannequin was also found to be one of the highly influential attribute of VME, its use in window displays will increase its effectiveness multiple times. Lighting inside the window display area should be proper and sufficient enough so as to make it clearly visible from a distance.
- (b) Use of digital screens inside the store and also in the window display area is also in fashion. Instead of spending hours of time, money and labour in creating and executing a window display and keep changing it at regular intervals to hold the interest levels of customers, retailers have now moved to digital versions of window display by using digital screens in the display area. Pictures or videos of items on promotion can be displayed on such screens. Pictures can be changed easily by putting it on slide show. Also use of large screens or a combination of screen makes it possible for customers to observe the displayed product from a distance. Mannequins are then replaced by real models used for photo shoot of apparels. And with video, retailers can also show the usage and fit of the garments with different combinations of other items and accessories.

- (c) Since lighting was also found to be an influential element of VM, it is suggested to use it in a creative way with a motive of inspiring customers.
- (d) To attract customers' attention on apparels inside the store, mannequins can be used interestingly. There are stores where colourful / metallic mannequins are being used, just to stand out in the market and grab customers' attention. On the other side, stores have started rejecting ideal body type mannequins and adopted real life body type mannequins like underweight, overweight and pregnant lady body type.
- (e) It was realised that almost 3 quarters of the sample respondents were female. Hence these stores should target and arrange the VM of the store so as to attract and influence women customers.

VI LIMITATIONS

Sampling method used for this research was non-probabilistic and also data was collected only from three cities which do not give equal distribution of samples across the country. Stores under study were Premium category retailers. However, response for discount stores, mass brands and luxury brand retailers could differ.

VII FUTURE RESEARCH SCOPE

- (a) Frequency of visit of samples was studied through this research. However reason of visit was not checked. Future researchers may try to find out reasons for visit and relate them to VM elements.
- (b) This research was based on Premium category MBOs. Similar research on SBOs and Discount stores can also be conducted.

- (c) Through this research impact of VME were studied on behaviour of customers. However Consumer buying behaviour can also be studied by future researchers relating the impact of VME with buying pattern.

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