

Importance of Visual Merchandising from Apparel Retailers' Perspective

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 25 May 2019

Keywords

Window displays, store interior, signage, lighting, color.

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ABSTRACT

The field of visual merchandising is growing very fast as the Indian retail is making its presence felt in the national and international arena. Today's fierce competition and the similarity of merchandise force each segment of the fashion industry to utilize visual merchandising to improve the desirability of products. Apparel retailers, especially, place more importance on visual merchandising to differentiate their offerings from others'. Retailers can help customers to find the right products through focused merchandising, intelligent store design and layout, and other visual merchandising practices. Visual merchandising uses displays, three dimensional spaces, and floor plans to create an environment that highlights a product's appearance, features, and benefits by appealing to one or more of the five human senses, most commonly sight. The present research aims to provide insights as to why visual merchandising should be considered as an important component of marketing plan and how visual merchandising influences buying behavior of customers. 43 retailers working for apparel retail outlets across Bangalore city were surveyed and asked to give their opinion on the role of visual merchandising in apparel retailing. The research results evidenced that the visual merchandising elements influence the apparel buying behavior of customers in the store. The results of this study can be valuable to apparel retailers for designing effective window and in-store displays to enhance the attractiveness of the merchandise and to create a favorable attitude towards the products among the shoppers.

1. Introduction

The retail sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in India. Increase in per capita income, growing urbanization, and economic reforms are some key factors that have propelled its growth. The growing Indian market has attracted many foreign retailers and Indian corporates to invest in this sector. Retailing in India is still dominated by unorganized retailers. However, organized retailing or modern formats of retailing is growing at a faster rate. Organized retailing in India is defined by modern retail formats, namely malls and supermarkets. It is witnessing a radical transformation in India. The increase in the number of retail chains across the country is an indication that organized retailing is emerging as an industry and will boom in a big way in the near future. Changing lifestyle, increased rate of literacy, a growing number of working women, excessive urbanization, high rate of media penetration, growing young population, tendency to 'spend now' and favorable demographic patterns act as the key in the recent spurt of the organized retail sector in India. The increased sophistication in the shopping pattern of consumers has resulted in big retail chains coming up in most metros; mini metros and towns. The past decade has witnessed a proliferation of organized formats in most major cities of the country.

The intensive competition among malls in the major cities of India has raised an important question of their viability and profitability. In this booming retail market in India, it became inevitable for the companies to learn how to retain their market share as well as to enhance it. With the entry of bigger players, the retail market is getting more and more organized and structured. Clothing and fashion accessories stand to be the largest category followed by food and grocery, footwear, and consumer durables in organized retailing. Past studies have indicated that the apparel store format and store ambience are also important in attracting customers. The competition in

apparel retail is intense with several organized and unorganized retailers trying to get a share of customer's attention and share of the customer's wallet. With increasing competition, marketers strive to ensure that their stores are appealing to their target customers. Retailers find it very difficult to create a differential advantage on the basis of merchandise alone and thus the store ambience plays an important role for market differentiation. Since many retailers use visual presentation of the store offering in order to encourage customers' buying behavior, this fact was expected to be found in the consumer and marketing literature. First impressions are often important indicators for apparel outlet footfalls and thus visual merchandising, particularly window displays play an important role in a consumer's decision that is to enter or not to enter a store.

Visual merchandising (VM) is the science and psychology of the retail and fashion world. VM involves the techniques to draw shoppers into a store and keep them there. It includes understanding buying habits and affects *what* you see - and *how* you see it. Three-dimensional displays, the use of color and accessories and the placement of the season's merchandise for maximum impact fall under the domain of VM. VM helps to attract the customers, towards the displayed products and also improves the shopping experience for customer by sending the right message about the merchandise and presenting it in a unique manner.

This paper provides insights as to why visual merchandising should be considered an important component of any marketing plan and how visual merchandising enhances the time span at an outlet and influences buying behavior of customers. The results will be useful to organized apparel retailers to understand their customers better and in framing their strategies. The organized apparel retailers can concentrate on the important factors which will lead to more

customer footfalls and which will actually enhance the buying of customers. This study will also be useful for organized apparel retailers who are planning to open new apparel outlets.

2. Review of literature

The research started with reading literature on modern formats of retailing. The review of literature reveals that the conventional visual merchandising elements (store design, lighting, product placements, atmospherics, fixtures and permanent props) are of high importance to the retail industry (Levy and Weitz, 2009). Visual merchandising today forms a critical element of retailing regardless of the kind of products and services the one offer. Visual merchandising is related to retail merchandising. The difference is that visual merchandising is the process of using appealing visual effects to stimulate sales (Sharmila and Anjali, 2008), whereas retail merchandising is the process of actually making those sales. Visual merchandising uses fundamental design principles while working with various materials and colors. A successful visual display is made in a variety of forms like: themes, colors, mannequins, forms, fixtures, hangings, poles or stands, platforms, paintings and wall-decoration, fabrics, tablecloths and banners, tables and furniture, lighting effect, accessories and props and music (Gini, 2005; Kisholo, 2008; and Vedamani, 2010). Merchandising themes are planned many months in advance in conjunction with the seasons, store promotion and arrival of new merchandise. Besides the facade and windows, there is also in-store decor that is designed to enhance the customer's comfort and convenience and enhance their shopping experience.

Visual merchandising enhances the attractiveness of a store and its perceived image from the viewpoint of customers. A positive mood serves as a contextual cue for evaluating the perceived quality, image of a product and store, and purchase intention (Bakamitsos, 2000). According to Lea-Greenwood (1998), retailers have commonly- and often effectively- responded to the increased competition with a strategic review of how the offer is communicated visually. Lea-Greenwood again asserted that visual merchandising is not merely one part of the total design and merchandising concept, but an extremely important element as the first visual cue that affects a consumer's decision to enter or not enter the retail store. Swanson and Everret (2000) also noted that visual merchandising is becoming one of the prominent avenues to obtain a differential advantage over their competitors. In 2002, Bell and Ternus proposed that effective visual merchandising techniques establish and maintain the store image in the customer's mind and provide support for the rest of the store's selling effort. That is, merchandise at the store can sell itself with effective display and signage, even without the assistance of a sales associate and thus, visual merchandising can aid retailers in lowering their operating costs. Similarly, Levy and Weitz (2004) maintained that visual communications in the store can provide necessary product information and suggest items or special purchases, and thereby help boost retail sales. According to Wright et al. (2006), atmospheric stimuli please the actual and emotional needs of consumers and enhance the degree of consumer participation in a store, leading to favourable purchasing behaviour. More recently, Law et al. (2010) also asserted that visual merchandising that covers the

store exterior and interior that are involved in creating a favorable shopping atmosphere can enhance consumers' perceived image of the store.

According to Pegler (1998), visual merchandising involves a number of technical and artistic components: color, texture, lighting, mannequins, fixture, graphics, signage and so on. Other researchers asserted that of all the atmospheric cues, color is the strongest motivator for shopping (Mills et al., 1995). Kerfoot et al. (2003) suggested that the use of a wide variety of colors is deemed to produce attractive and appealing display and had the potential to positively impact on a respondent's propensity to browse. Many researchers also have considered lighting as one of the major contributing factors of visual merchandising in the retail setting (Bell and Ternus, 2002; Berman and Evans, 2004; Levy and Weitz, 2004). More recently, Park and Farr's research (2007) revealed that the color quality of lighting in a retail store environment such as color temperature and color appearance affects consumers' emotional states and the behavioral intention of approach-avoidance. Similar to the previous research, Omar (1999) asserted that the careful selection of merchandise for the display—items that are distinctive, timely, stylish, or particularly good value— contributes to the successful sale of those items. At the same time, the use of appropriate merchandise, careful choice of the right fixtures, and tastes and imagination in designing and executing the display contributes greatly to the overall store image. More recently, Cant, M.C. and Hefer, Y. (2012) also asserted that visual merchandising enhances store image and consumer shopping experience in the store, adding value to the store character. They found, in particular, that spatial orientation within the store and well-designed visual merchandising display affects consumers' perception of the retail store. Furthermore, the results of their study indicated that consumers perceive visual merchandising as a promotional tool. As store environmental cues represent the most imperative channel through which retailers can communicate their images with consumers, it is critical to understand how consumers infer images from such environmental cues. According to Dickson and MacLachlan (1990), consumers employ store image to determine how suitable they are as customers for a particular store. Bell and Ternus (2002) suggested that effective visual merchandising establishes and maintains the store's physical and mental image in the consumers' mind. A number of previous studies indicated that store atmospheric cues create the overall context within which shoppers make purchase decisions and are likely to significantly impact shaping store image.

Recently, Clement et al. (2013) acknowledged that "the effects of visual cues on in-store decision making are not thoroughly explored in marketing research". Visual merchandising is one of the most important but understudied areas in retailing research. After reviewing the literature available in the related areas of visual merchandising it is found that with respect to the Indian retail market, especially the apparel stores, there is insignificant research available on visual merchandising. As visual merchandising is an emerging concept in Indian retail it requires huge thrust in the research.

3. Research methodology

The study intended to know the role of visual merchandising in enhancing store atmospherics and customer shopping in organized retail outlets of Bangalore. Bangalore city was chosen for conducting the study as it has a wide spread of malls and stand-alone organized apparel retail outlets. A structured questionnaire was developed to gather the primary data from the retailers. The retailers were asked to give their opinion about the role of visual merchandising in apparel retailing. The questionnaire consisted of seven demographic questions to gather information about the name of the respondent, designation, category, name of the retail firm working for, years of experience, gender and qualification. Fourteen multiple choice questions (related to visual merchandising), thirteen dichotomous with probing questions and two open ended questions (taking their views related to this field) were asked.

Retailers working for apparel retail outlets across Bangalore city were surveyed. Thus, sampling procedure is purposive sampling. For retailers, the reason for the survey was explained briefly. The sample size for retailers was 50 retailers, but 7 retailers were outliers. Hence, the revised sample size was 43 retailers. Data collected were entered into an Excel file. The data file was imported from Excel to the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences' (SPSS) software for analysis. Statistical methods used in the data analysis in this study were descriptive statistics and Chi-square test.

4. Results and discussion

Demographic analysis of retailers:

Demographic analysis of the retailers on the basis of their experience in the retail field was carried out. (18)41.9% of the retailers have an experience of 5-10 years in the retail field, (17) 39.5% have less than 5 years of experience and (8)18.6% have more than 10 years of experience.

Visual Merchandising from Retailers' Perspective

From the below graph-1, (19)45.2% of the respondents said that visual merchandising helps in attracting the customers. They said that the purpose of visual merchandising is to attract, engage, and motivate the customers to make a purchase. (17)40.5% said that it creates magic to increase footfalls by inviting the customers into the store with the help of attractive window displays. (13)31.0% said that it is all about planning and displaying the merchandise through exterior and interior presentations. They said that bringing the right assortment in the right quantity and displaying them in the right place is more important to make the product accessible to the customers. (11)26.2% said visual merchandising is all about displaying the merchandise with the help of props and fixtures to put the merchandise in focus. (5)11.9% said it improves the shopping experience of the customers by sending the right message about the merchandize.

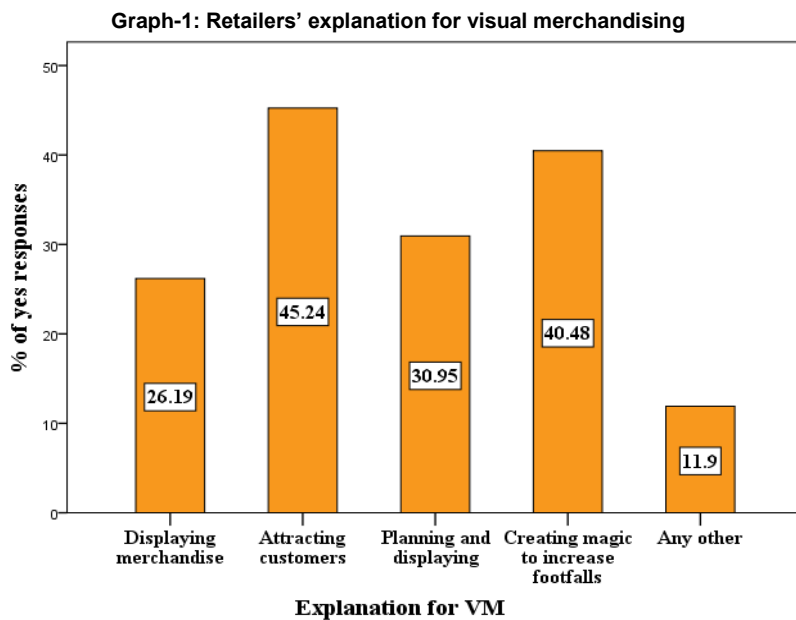


Table-1: Ranking of VM parameters

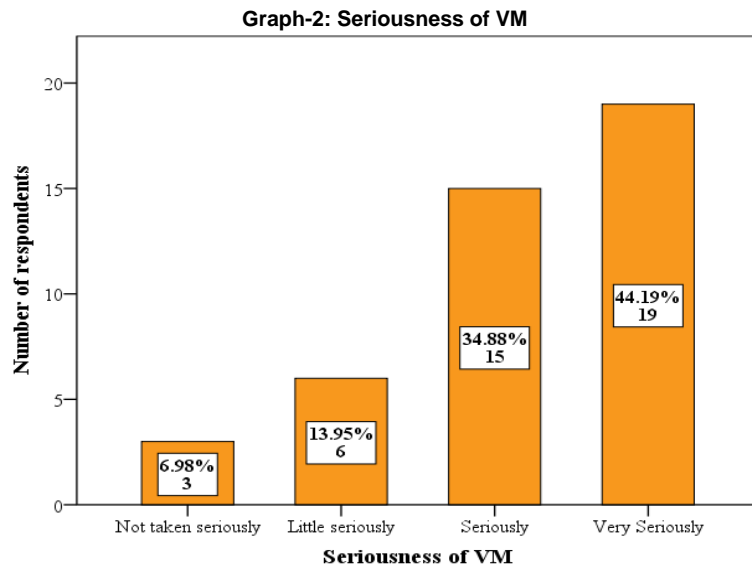
	Space management	Use of colour and light	Theme displays	Mannequins and fixtures planning	Windows and POP displays	Interior and exterior signage
Mean	3.47	3.86	2.35	2.65	3.14	5.53
N	43	43	43	43	43	43
SD	1.517	1.767	1.251	1.131	1.441	0.984
Rank	4	5	1	2	3	6

The above table-1 shows that theme display is the most important parameter of visual merchandising which was ranked first. The retailers said that theme displays capture people's imaginations and a good theme will lure the customer with a

shopping mood into the store. Mannequin and fixtures planning is the second most important parameter which was ranked second. The retailers mentioned that mannequins are wrapped in the most fashionable attire offered by the store and are

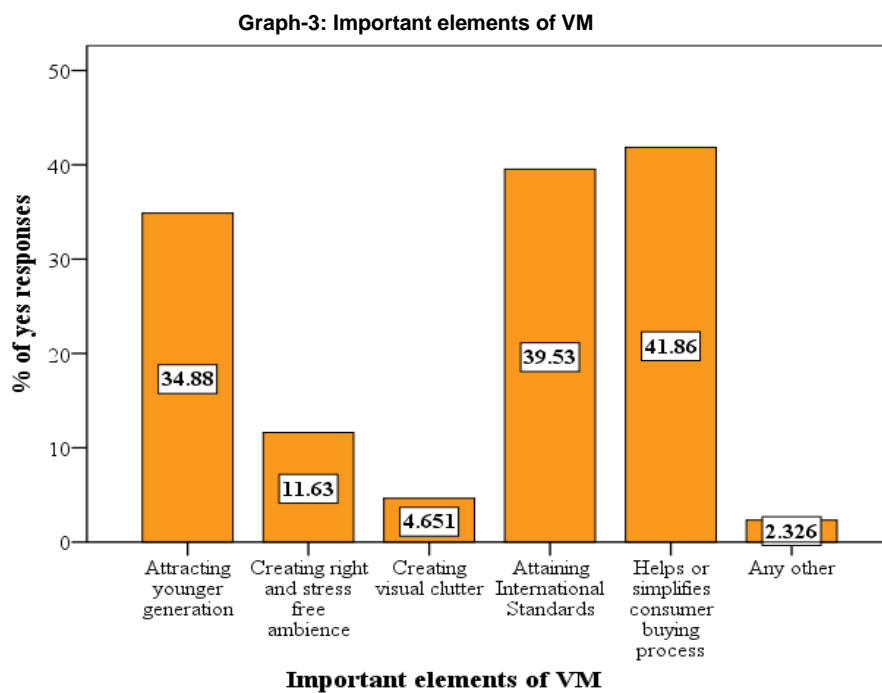
capable of attracting a lot of potential customers. They are the most widely used props for visual merchandising in fashion. The design of the fixtures, placement of merchandise and the fixtures on the floor also direct the customers through the store. Windows and POP displays were ranked third. The retailers said that well-designed window displays encourage impulse sales and increase customer's curiosity. Space management was ranked fourth. They were of the view that

space planning is integral to the success of any retail store since the biggest investment in retail is in space. It enables a smooth and efficient customer flow into the store and within it. Use of colour and lighting was ranked fifth as they attract the attention and pull more customers into the store. The least important parameter was interior and exterior signage which was ranked sixth.



(19)44.2 % of the respondents said that visual merchandising is considered very seriously by Indian retailers, followed by (15)34.9% who said that it is taken seriously (Graph-2). They were of the view that it is very essential today to take up this task in a planned manner by hiring Visual Merchandisers and window dressers, and keeping a sufficient budget for visual merchandising activities. The retailers are

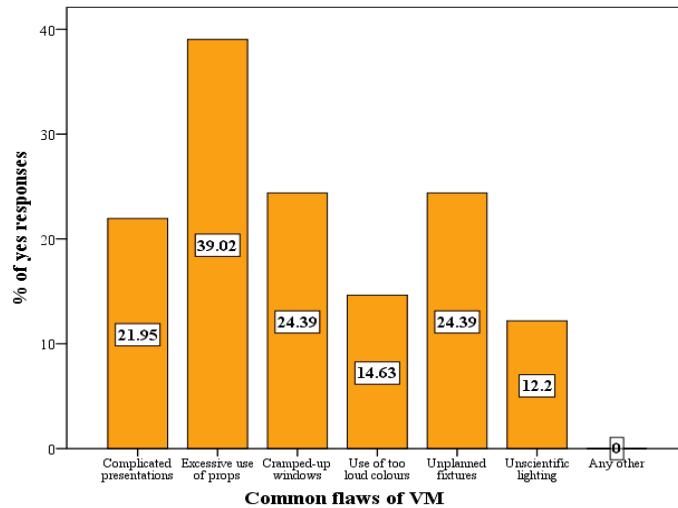
ready to spend a good amount of money on this activity as they know that it will give good results in terms of attracting customers and increasing sales. (6)14% said it is taken little seriously and (3)7% they were not serious about it as they felt that sales can be an outcome of better promotions and good services by the front end staff which helps to engage customers and achieve better sales.



From the above graph-3, (18)41.9% of the retailers agree that visual merchandising helps or simplifies the consumers' buying process. Retailers agree that the technique of displaying the merchandise in its proper range simplifies the decision making of the customers and help them in their buying process. (17)39.5% said that though it has emerged on the international scene as one of the most important tools of retailing, it is slowly establishing an identity in India and is attaining the international standard. Retailers are making every effort to match their standards with international features. (15)34.9% said that it is attracting and impressing younger generation. They mentioned that they are using all the strategies to attract the younger generation by bringing in

theme displays, changing window displays as per seasons and festivals, highlighting merchandise with bright colors, using graphics and design to display the latest trend, playing popular music in the store etc. (5)11.6% said that it is basically to create right and stress free ambience. The retail store must be a place of excitement for customers. It should be a place of experiencing life's little pleasures, feeling great and important, leaving the day to day stress behind and enjoying the shopping experience. They also opined that if the customers are happy and feel stress free they tend to buy more. (2)4.7% said it is creating visual clutter among the customers and (1) 2.3% said that it is creating a brand and store image.

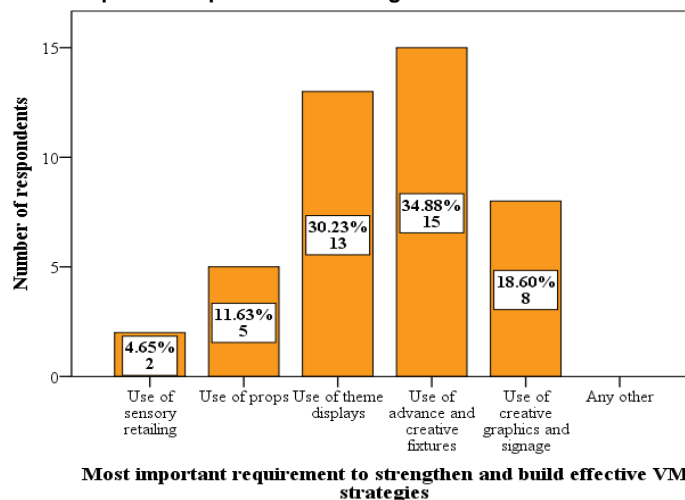
Graph-4: Common flaws of visual merchandising



The above graph-4 depicts that, (17)39.02% of the respondents said that excessive use of props is the common flaw noticed in the Indian retail outlets. They agree that the props are not used appropriately and thus there needs to be a deep understanding in the usage of props as an aid of selling and must be used creatively. (10)23.8% each observed that complicated presentations, cramped-up windows and unplanned fixtures are the common mistakes. They said that there is a need to improve the quality of window displays to

avoid confusion and complications among the customers. They were of the view that the fixtures used by the Indian retail outlets are not properly planned and thus there is a need of bringing and using fixtures properly. They also added that fixtures are useful for a logical and planned display, at the same time they help in more convenient shopping for the customers. (6)14.3% said use of too loud colours is the common flaw observed and (5)11.9% said unscientific lighting.

Graph-5: Most important requirement to strengthen and build effective VM strategy



Graph-5 portrays that, (15) 34.9% of the respondents said that use of advance and creative fixtures is the most important requirement to strengthen and build effective visual merchandising strategy. It is crucially important to have designer store fixtures for elevating the aesthetics of the apparel store. They help in keeping the clothes in a more organized manner and also give them good visibility. (13)30.2 % said theme displays are the prime requirement as a well-themed display can draw people into the store by creating a

story or aspiration that they can buy the products. (8)18.6% said use of creative graphics and signage is the need of the day as quality signage is an easy and effective way to drive foot traffic, communicate and educate the customers. (5)11.6% said the use of props as they increase the look of the merchandise and thus increase the sales. (2)4.7 % said use of sensory retailing to stimulate all the senses – attract not only by sight but smell, touch, and sound too.

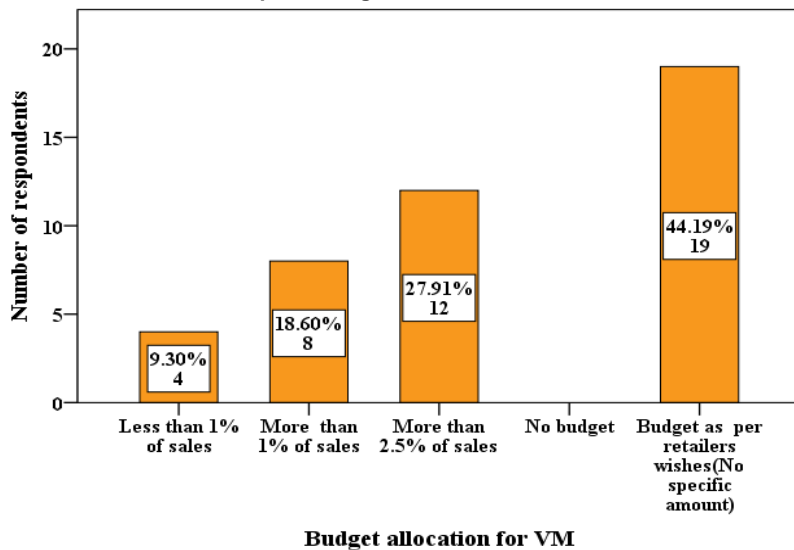
Table-2: Ranking of objectives of effective VM

	Attracting more customers	Attracting younger generation	Simplifying consumer's buying process	Creating stress relieving ambience	Increasing sales per square foot	Increasing footfalls	Making product accessible to customers
Mean	2.33	3.51	4.05	5.23	4.81	3.14	4.88
N	43	43	43	43	43	43	43
SD	1.643	1.778	1.718	1.702	1.402	2.042	1.917
Rank	1	3	4	7	5	2	6

The above table-2 shows that the primary objective of visual merchandising is to attract the customers to a place of business in order to sell the merchandise which was ranked as 1. VM involves the techniques to draw the shoppers into a store to increase the footfalls which was the second important objective, ranked-2 by the respondents. Attracting younger generation was ranked-3 as today's younger generation are

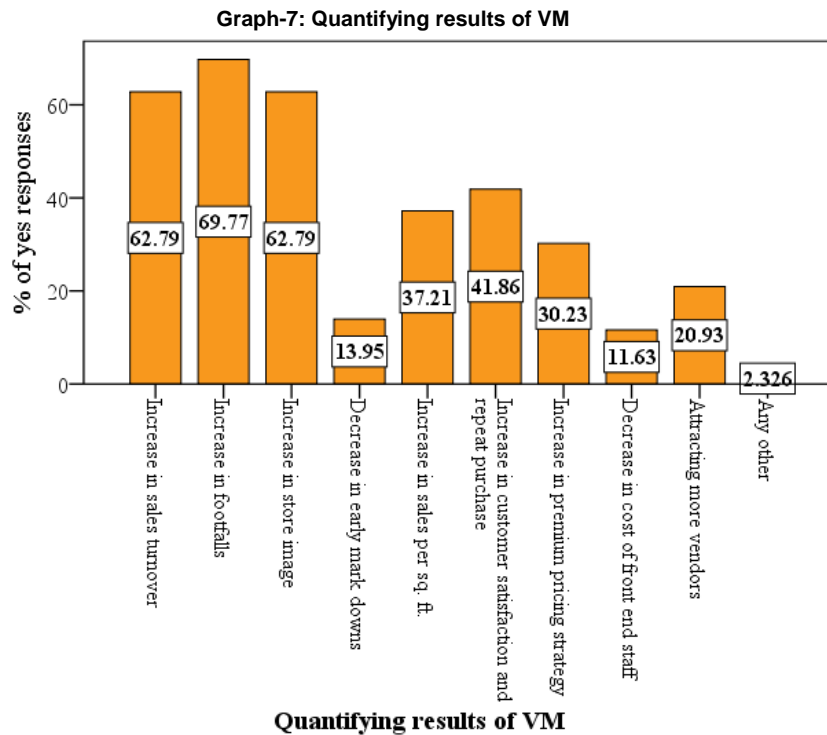
the type of customers who spend more and are high potential customers for many products particularly the apparels. Simplifying the consumers' buying process was ranked-4, increasing sales per sq. ft. was ranked-5, making product accessible to customers was ranked-6 and creating stress relieving ambience was ranked-7.

Graph-6: Budget allocation for VM



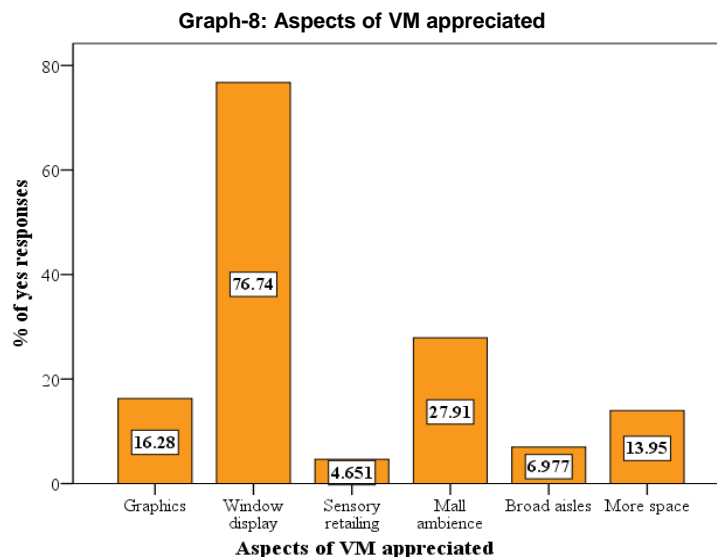
The majority of the respondents (19)44.2% said that budget for visual merchandising activities must be as per the retailers' wishes i.e. no specific amount any year (Graph-6). The retailer decides the budget on the basis of the type of merchandise, market situation, type of customers, objective at the time of promotion, location of the store, the space of the retail outlet, etc. (12)27.9 % of the respondents opined that the budget should be more than 2.5% of sales. They do not mind keeping a little high budget as compared to the other retailers, as they know that investment in this front will help them in

attracting large number of customers and thereby increasing sales. They also added that retailers in developed countries spend large amount on VM, but Indian retailers lag behind in this respect. (8)18.6% of the respondents said more than 1% of sales and 9.3% said less than 1% of sales. It was observed that all the retailers had a budget while planning their visual merchandising activities. There was zero response for no budget that itself explains the importance of this technique in apparel retailing.



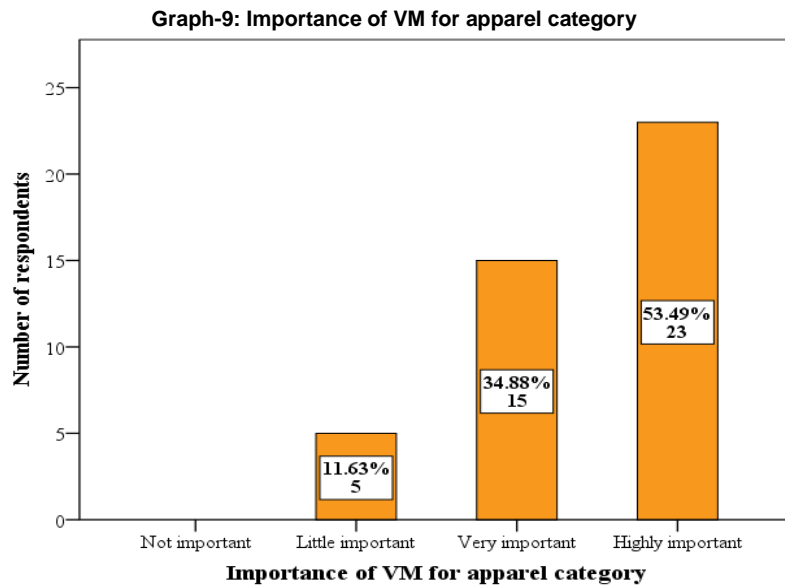
The graph-7 depicts that, (30)69.8% of the respondents said that increase in footfalls is the main outcome of visual merchandising activities. (27)62.8% each said that increase in sales turnover and increase in store image are the results of visual merchandising activities. (18)41.9% said increase in customer satisfaction and repeat purchase, followed by (16)37.2% who said the increase in sales per sq. ft., (13)30.2% said the increase in premium pricing strategy, (9)20.9% said

attracting more vendors, (6)14% said decrease in early markdowns and (5)11.6% said decrease in cost on front end staff. They opined that VM is a silent selling technique that help to reduce the employee mix and increase per square feet returns and can further help in reducing marketing budgets. The majority of the respondents said that they see the impact of visual merchandising directly in terms of increase in footfalls, sales turnover and store image.



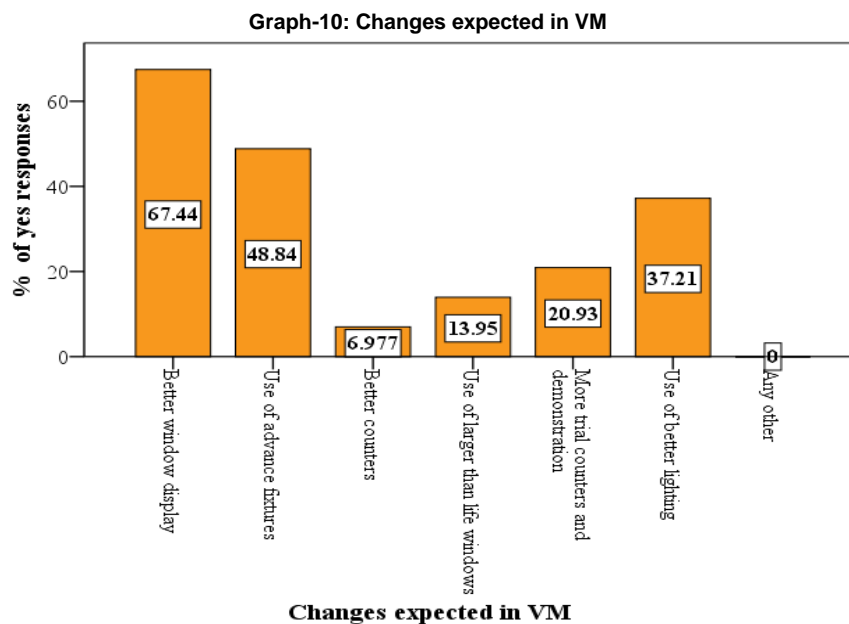
The majority of the respondents i.e. (33)76.7% said that the visual merchandising aspect most appreciated by Bangalorean customers is the window display as windows showcase the merchandise and convey the most important information in a way that's compelling and relevant to the target audience (Graph-8). (12)27.9% said mall ambience is

appreciated followed by (7)16.3% who said the graphics as large graphics are used in the windows which are easily noticed by the customers highlighting a special offer, (6)14% said more space, (3)7% said broad aisles and (2)4.7% sensory retailing.



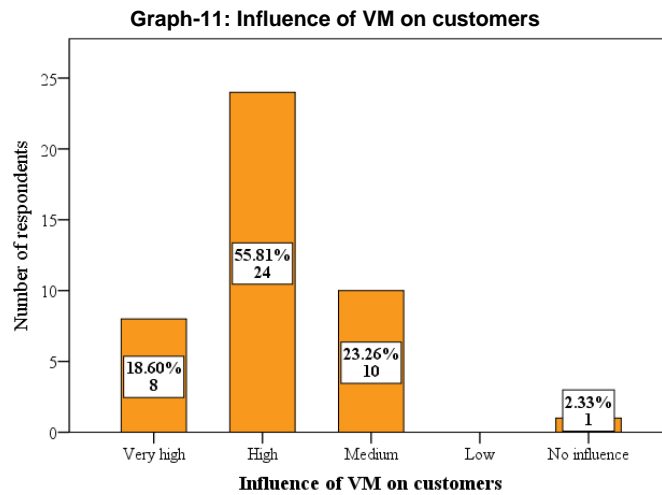
The graph-9 reveals that (23)53.5% respondents said that visual merchandising for apparel category is highly important, (15)34.9% said very important as Indian retailers have realized the importance of visual merchandising in attracting the customers, increasing the footfalls, providing a unique

shopping experience, and creating the actual purchase. They are increasingly spending on both the environment and the advanced fixtures; stylish fittings; emphatic lighting and digital signage for an international appeal and inviting feel. (5)11.6% said it is little important as it is unnecessary expenditure.



The graph-10 shows that (28)67.4% of the respondents expect changes in current projects for apparel category in the form of better window displays. They mentioned that windows are among the first things shoppers see when they walk or drive by the store, so they are the ideal place to capture shoppers' attention. With a well-designed graphics program, they can truly live up to their promise as windows of opportunity to help bring the customers into the store and drive sales. Thus, Visual Merchandisers should be very creative in

designing the innovative window displays to create the most critical first impression on the customer. (21)48.8% said use of advance fixtures. (16)37.2 % said use of better lighting as it is often over-looked by most of the retailers. The LED light strips, neon lights and colored fluorescent lamps can be used to give a contemporary look to the store. (9)20.9% said use of more trial counters and demonstration is needed, (6)14% said use of larger than life windows and (3)7% said better counters.



(24)55.8% of the respondents said that influence of visual merchandising on customers’ buying decision is high, followed by (10)23.3% who said medium, (8)18.6% said very high and (1)2.3 % said there is no influence (Graph-11).

Responses to open ended and dichotomous question:

- The majority of the respondents said that elegant counters with visual merchandising strategies help to sell the merchandise faster as they are sensory and visually appealing, influence the customers to buy on impulse, help in explaining the product, and increase the KPI. The retailers also said that elegant counters attract the attention of the customers and make them stay longer at the purchase point and ultimately it contributes to increase in sales.
- Most of the respondents said that a good backup of lighting and fixtures are needed to attract the customers. They added that lighting is very important for the apparel category as shades and colors of the product matters the customers. There is a need for advanced lighting technique to attract the attention of the shoppers and to create a positive mood. They mentioned that without fixtures apparel stores are incomplete. Fixtures not only advertise the cloths but make the store look more established and elegant. A well-chosen display fixture can add zest to the cloths which are displayed. They are able to create a great presentation of the products, will encourage more shoppers to check out the products and guide them to buy the clothing.
- The majority of the respondents agreed that there is a need of bringing in creativity in the fixtures used for apparel stores in Bangalore retail. They said that cost effective fixtures with international prototype saves space and facilitates “good appeal”. They also added that innovation and creativity in fixtures are the need of the hour.
- The majority of the respondents were of the opinion that allocating a good budget for visual merchandising gives better results in terms of increase in sales per sq. ft.
- Most of the respondents said that target customers for apparel category are generally from an elite group of society who like to shop in an elegant retail format.

Whereas, a few said that it's not true always as fashion is affordable today.

- The majority of the respondents said that graphics and design are a new trend to create window displays. The graphics make the windows get a larger than life look with which the customers associate themselves while buying. Many stores have found success using oversized in-store or window graphics to add visual impact to display. The graphics can be repeated on a smaller scale throughout the store to earmark featured merchandise or sale items.
- The majority of the retailers responded that display of apparel with the help of props, plays a wonderful role in increasing the sales. They said props increase the look of the merchandise, take the customers to a virtual world, and help in cross-selling and up-selling.
- Most of the respondents said that the interior and exterior signage influence the customers in many ways. Signs serve as a type of silent salesperson for the business. Exterior signs draw attention of the customer towards the store and help differentiate it from others on the street. Interior signs help customers locate merchandise and can lead to impulse sales when added to special displays.
- Most of the respondents said that visual merchandising in Bangalore is touching the International Standards. Whereas, a few said that it has a long way to live up to international standards.
- The majority of the respondents said that it is important to hire a Visual Merchandiser today. Retailers were of the opinion that Visual Merchandisers are in charge of creating attractive visual displays in retail outlets and play a significant role in contributing to the sales. As organized retail grows and number of players increase, the role of Visual Merchandisers would become more and more crucial.
- Most of the retailers agree that the expenditure incurred on visual merchandising activities is cost-effective. As most of the visual merchandising activities and techniques lead to better sales per square foot. The results of visual merchandising are increased footfalls; customer loyalty, increased sales

per square foot etc. and so most of them believe that visual merchandising is cost-effective.

The Chi-Square test was used to find the association between retailers' experience and various aspects of VM. The retailers' experience was categorized into three groups as: below 5 years, 5-10 years, and more than 10 years. The test results indicate that there is no difference in the opinion of retailers on the basis of experience in the retail field about various aspects of visual merchandising.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at evaluating the role of visual merchandising in enhancing store atmospherics and customer shopping form a retailer perspective. The study results

suggests that apparel retailers should use visual merchandising displays to enhance a shopper's experience by beautifying the store, to create a relaxed environment and to create interest and desire to enter the store. Visual merchandising could also be used as a tool to display the store's brand and to communicate information about the products as well as their quality. It can be concluded that visual merchandising can help create that positive customer image that leads to successful sales. It not only communicates the store's image, but also reinforces the store's advertising efforts and encourages impulse buying by the customer. Thus, retailers should maintain the stores' image through effective graphic designs and attractive visual arts with the purpose to attract, engage and motivate the customer towards making a purchase.

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