



A STUDY OF ONLINE VISUAL MERCHANDISING ELEMENTS (OVME) OF INDIAN FASHION BRANDS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR

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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 behavior 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.

Online Visual Merchandising Elements (OVME) have been categorized into two major segments: High Task Relevant Environment (HRE) and Low Task Relevant Environment (LTRE). further both in total have five categories under LTRE there are two (atmospheric feature and registration) and HTRE includes three (web navigation, web graphics and product demonstration). If we go further we can see there are thirteen elements within category - background color, text color, atmospheric features, and registration requirement within LTRE; site map, search engine, website geometry, presentation format, product view dimensionality, apparel color, product display method, and mix/match option within HTRE. After this 55 sub- elements were identified 17 sub elements within LTRE group and 38 sub elements within HTRE group.

For this study, 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. Also all these 4 MBOs are available online. Hence Online Visual Merchandising Elements of these stores and their impact on Customer Behavior are 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 analyzed and it was found that 80% sample agreed with the influence of VME on their behavior. 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.

Keywords: Visual Merchandising, Online Visual Merchandising Elements, Customer Behavior,, VM, VME, OVME.

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1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 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 organized and unorganized retail, where the unorganized retail market contributes 92% of the total retail sector in India.

Retailing could simply be defines "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.

1.2 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)

1.3 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 behavior (Fig. 1).

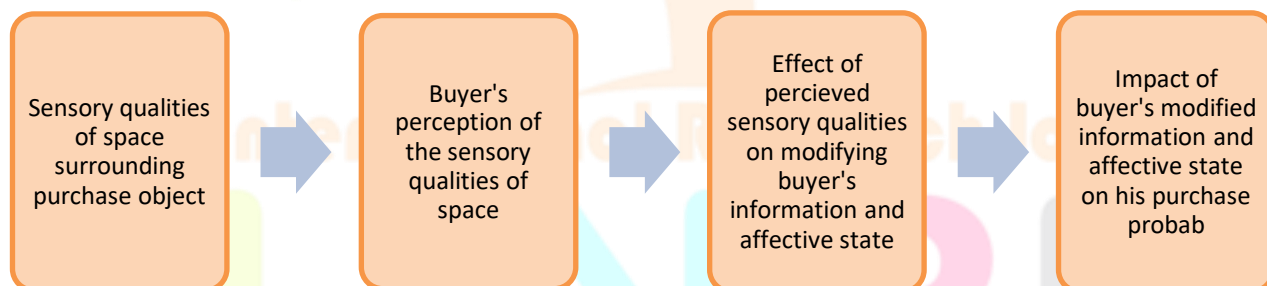


Figure 1: Step by step process of buyers' purchase decision based on atmospheric elements. (Source: Kotler, P. 1974, p.54)

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)

1.4: OBJECTIVE OF STUDY:

The primary reason for conducting this research is to study all possible Online Visual Merchandising Elements, as suggested by various authors, academicians & practitioners and to assess them for their effectiveness and preference by Customer.

2: 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 Babin et. al. (2003). Aesthetic atmosphere Chandon et. 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). Garau et. 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.

Kleinova et. 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. Soomro et. 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.

Upadhyay et. al. (2019) found that highly effective VME of apparel stores are Window Display, Color blocking, Mannequins, Lighting and use of Price Tags.

3: RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 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.

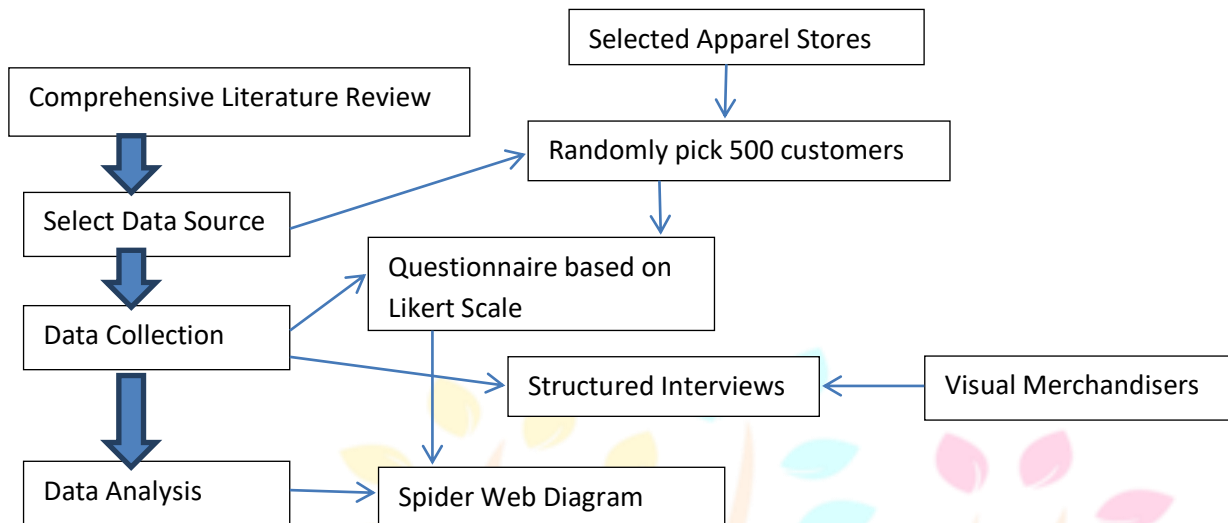


Figure 2: Proposed methodology in sequence

3.2 RESEARCH GAP:

Having gone through the previous researches, it was discovered that there is no comprehensive list of OVM elements and none of the researchers have ever dealt with all of them and tried to find their impact on Customers' buying behavior. It was also found that few researchers have taken wrong attributes under consideration which could have confused respondents.

3.3 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 and web portals were also explored. OVM elements used by these retailers on their respective web portals 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.

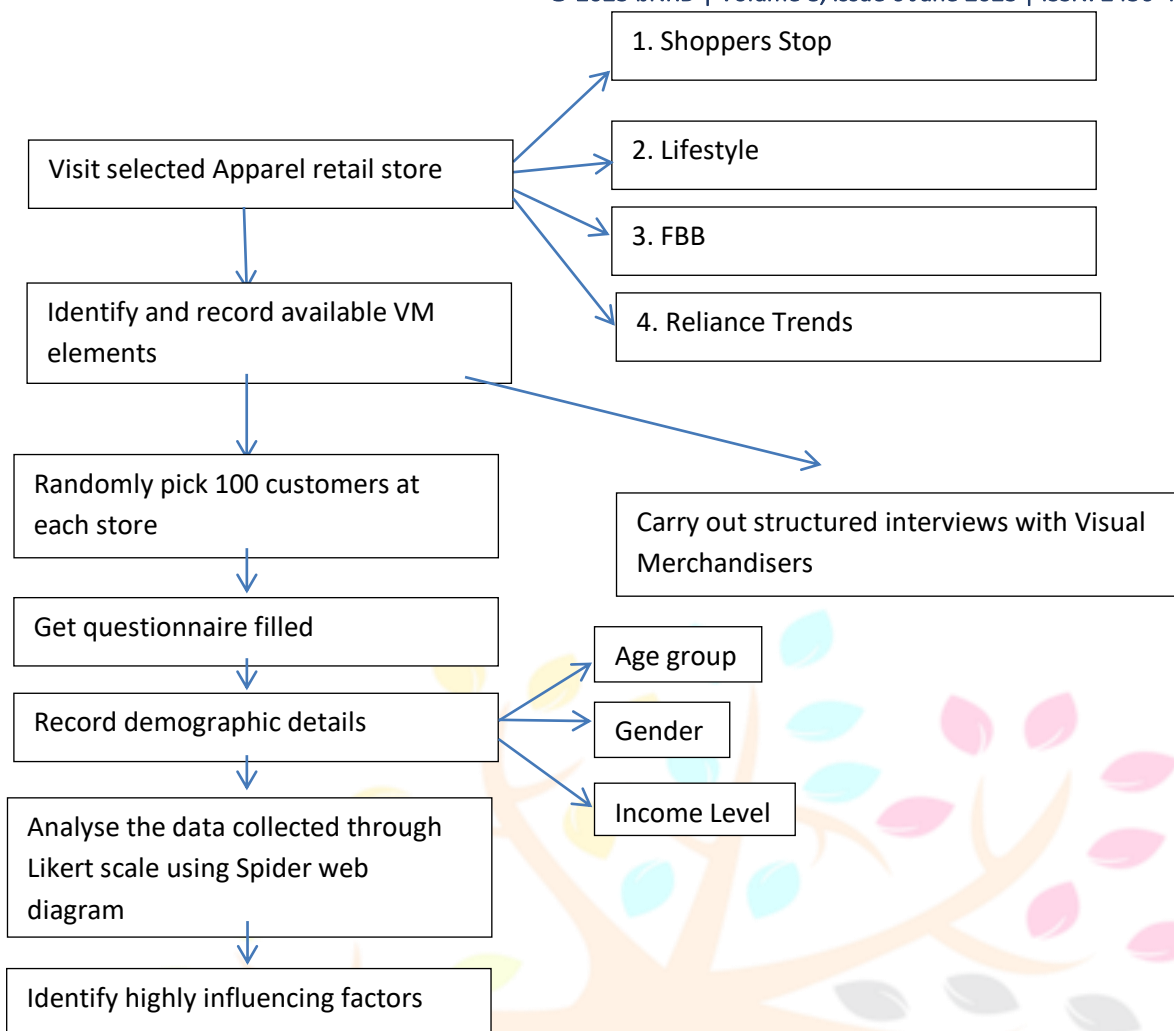


Figure 3: Comprehensive work plan for research project

3.4 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.

3.5 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.

3.6 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

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

$$P \text{ (Proportion value)} = 0.5$$

$$D \text{ (Precision Level)} = 0.05$$

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.

3.7 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.

A questionnaire was prepared for only those respondents who have shopped at offline stores of at least one of the below stores:

- Shoppers Stop
- Lifestyle
- Fashion at Big Bazaar (FBB)
- Reliance Trends

or have shopped online from at least one of their online counterparts:

- www.shoppersstop.com
- <https://trends.ajio.com>
- www.lifestylestores.com
- www.fbbonline.in

A number of Visual Merchandisers and apparel retailers have been interviewed and as per their suggestion, these four stores have been shortlisted as subjects of this research because of their similar attributes like size, product offerings, availability & location, target customers, affordability and brand image. These four retailers are the only four National Brands with Multi Brand Outlets (MBO) all over India having presence on both Offline and online platforms. Their target customers are same which makes these stores competitors of one another. They are backed and funded by similar sized parent organizations. These retailers have their store presence across India and also offer mass brands. Their stores are of similar size, offer similar brands / products with similar VM budget, which makes them fall into same group of retailers.

3.8 ANALYTICAL TOOL:

Data was analyzed 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.

4: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULT

4.1 OVM ELEMENTS

Responses collected from 500 online customers who have shopped from at least one of the stores under study. Collected data from response sheets was then converted into tabular form and represented using graphical tools. It was further discussed with retailers / visual merchandisers of the stores under study to better understand and analyze the response pattern of customers.

Table 4.1: Most important OVM feature of an Online Store

Most important feature of online store / portal	Web layout	Web graphics	Intro page	Brands	loading time	search filter
Sum Total	56	79	130	85	45	105

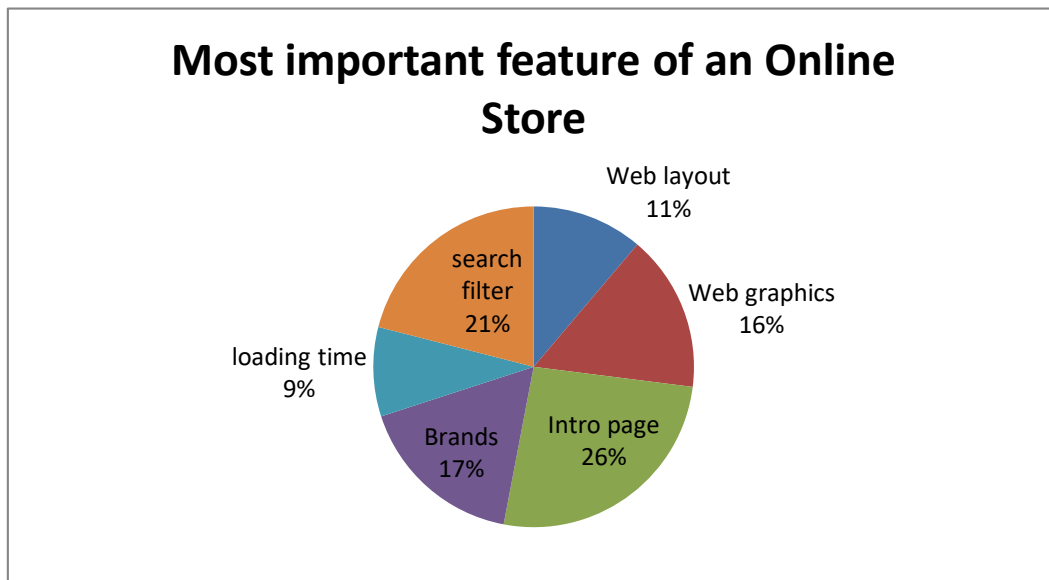


Figure 4: Analysis of responses for OVM attributes

Table 4.2: Ranking order of important OVM features based on response at Table no. 4.1

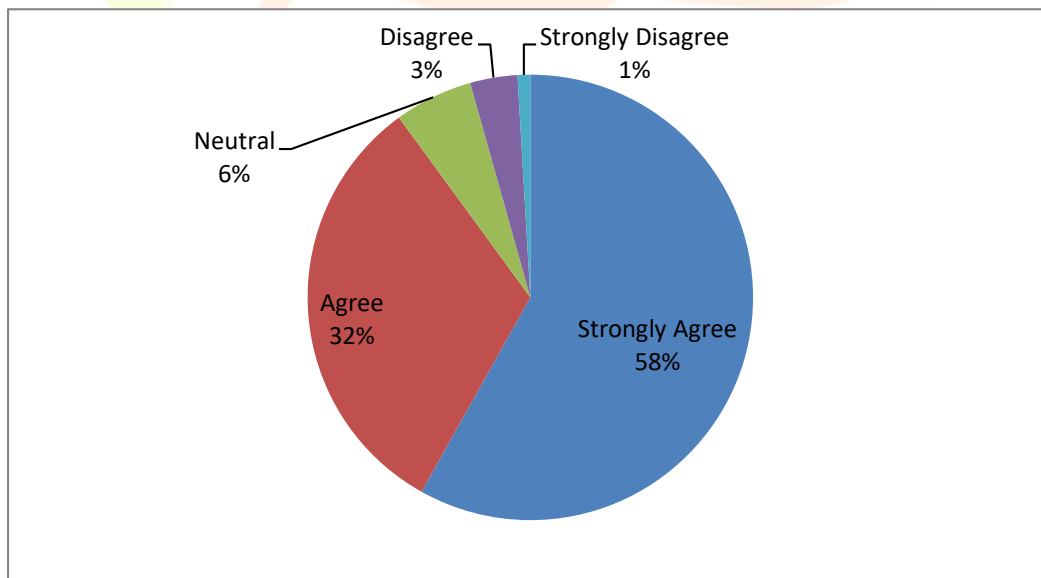
Rank	Important OVM Attributes of an Online Store
1	Intro Page
2	Search Filter
3	Brands availability
4	Web Graphics
5	Web Layout
6	Website Loading time

The pie-chart diagram above explains that customers have diversified choices with respect to driving factors which holds customers' attention and make them stay and surf the website for a longer period. However, the most influential features of OVM elements were found to be Intro Page and Search Filter. This means, customers once invited to online portal of retailers, can be made to stay and surf further with the use of attractive and interesting 'Intro Page'. An unattractive 'Intro Page', may make the customers to bounce back from the first page itself and if the 'Intro Page' was not found user friendly, customers would not bother to check further and may jump to competitor's website. 'Search filter' is found to be second most important OVM attribute because it saves surfing time and helps the customers to find the exact brand / product / category, that customer wanted. In case the exact searched product is not available then customers are offered alternate options which could suffice customer's need.

Respondents have rated 'Website Loading Time' as the least important factor of an Online Store. This could be because of easy availability of high speed internet over desktops and smart phones, at economical price. After the introduction of 3G / 4G internet services and economical smart phones, customers tend to opt for unlimited internet access packages over pay per use / data consumption as earlier done. Website development technology has also evolved now. Better servers allow thousands of customers to logon and access the same website at the same time. Retailers have also reduced the use of unnecessary web elements which increases the website size. During content analysis too, we found that none of the websites under study was using Intro / Background music, however all these retailers play music in their physical stores.

Table 4.3: Level of agreement on impact of OVM elements

Attributes	SA	A	N	D	SD
Domain Name Identification	413	87	0	0	0
Pleasant Home page	425	70	5	0	0
Shipping / Delivery Instructions	260	180	15	45	0
Live chat, Toll-free number, social media platforms	230	250	20	0	0
Personalized messages	135	205	60	90	10
Pop-up messages and banners	215	280	0	5	0
Site Map	140	195	70	45	50
Search Bars and Filters	365	120	15	0	0
Fonts, Images, Banner, Video	245	220	35	0	0
Product images	380	120	0	0	0
Video or multiple angle images	325	105	65	5	0
Product description	330	115	55	0	0
Mix and match	315	122	30	33	0

**Figure 5: Pie Chart- Response Distribution of Sample**

Total responses of 500 samples were analysed to check the impact of OVM elements on behaviour of customers. The Pie-chart distribution above shows that 90% of the total responses are either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' which proves a positive impact of OVM elements on customer behaviour. 6% of response was 'Neutral' which could be because respondent was not aware / confident about the impact of that OVM element. Out of total responses from 500 respondents, 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree' together formed only 4% of total responses. The above data was plotted in spider-web diagram to clearly demonstrate the highly influential OVM Elements.

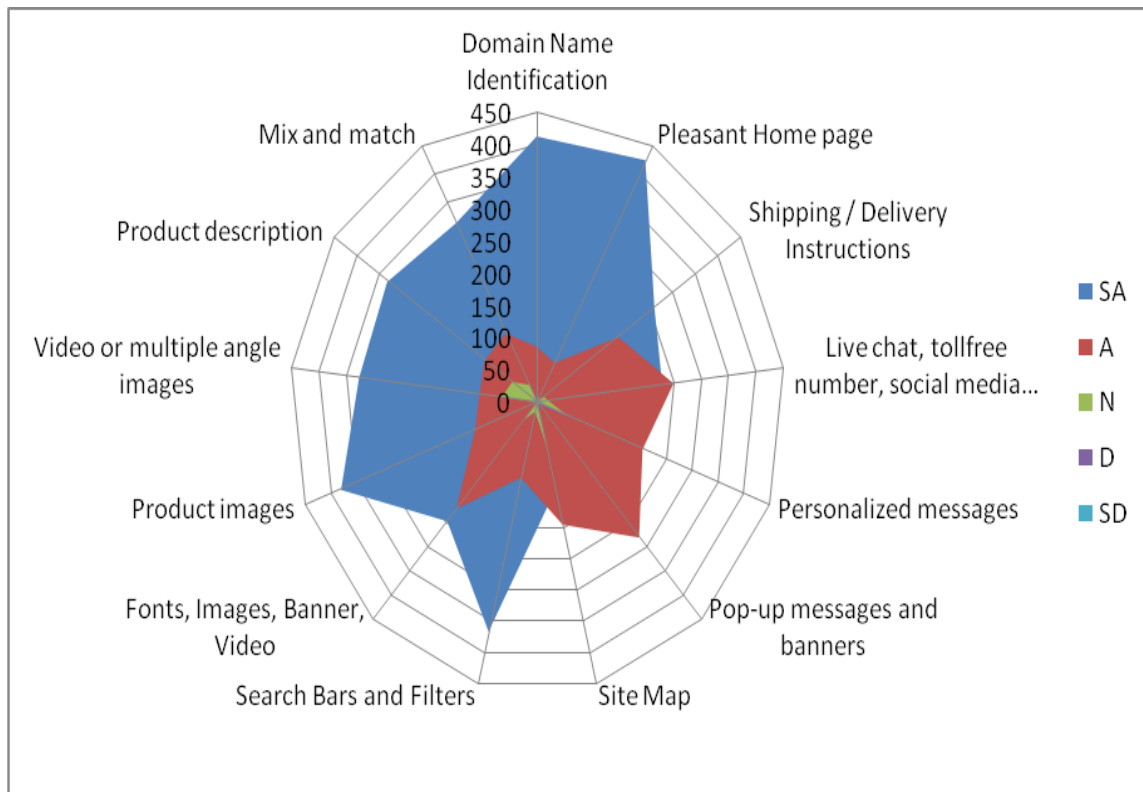


Figure 6: Spider-Web diagram - showing number of responses on impact of OVM elements (Source: Researcher's Analysis)

The graph and the table above, clearly indicates that Domain name identification, Pleasant home page, Product images and search bar & filters are the most influential elements on consumer behaviour. Product description and video or multiple angle images also found to be of great impact which might be because these are the only elements through which product is introduced to customers.

4.2 DEMOGRAPHICS

4.2.1 GENDER INFORMATION:

Gender information graph below shows that only 35% of sample respondents were Female and 65% respondents were male, who buy apparels from the online stores under study. We have already studied and found that female customers are more inclined towards shopping from physical offline stores, hence their presence on online platform is found lesser than 'Male' customers. It is said that shopping is more of a task / job for men. According to a study 'Men buy, women shop' researchers at Wharton's University of Pennsylvania, found that Women prefer personal interaction with sales associates, while men look for parking space, stock availability and checkout time. This phenomenon is again proved through this research at hand. We found more male customers than female customers on online platform, this could be because online stores save shopping time. Also you don't need to visit the store, search for the item and wait in the queue at the cash / checkout counter.

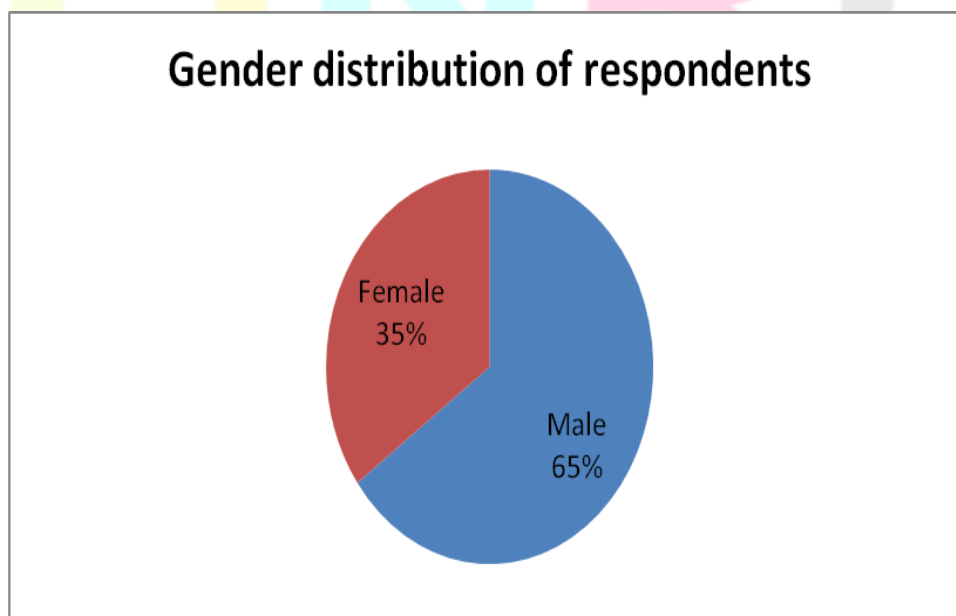
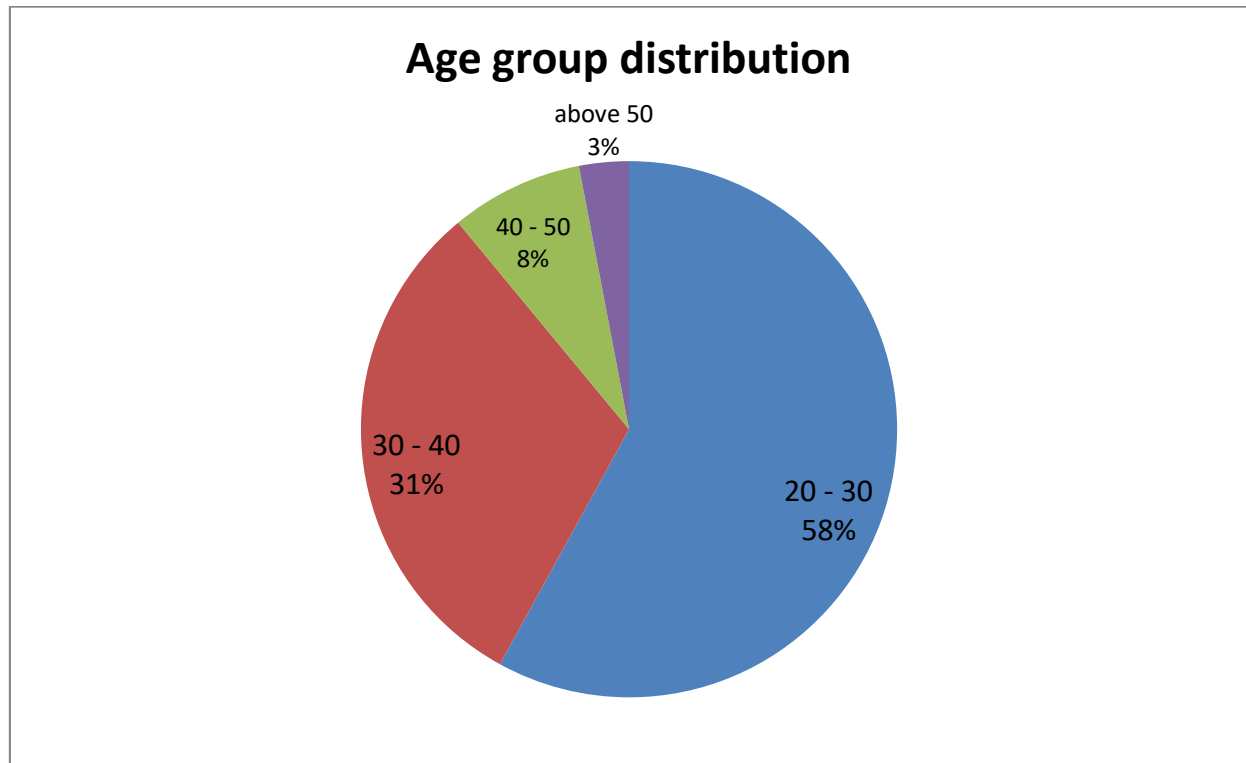


Figure 7: Analysis of Gender Information of the sample**4.2.2 AGE GROUP INFORMATION:**

The graph below shows that majority of sample lies in the age group of 20 to 40 years. A small percentage of sample respondents were in the age group of 40 to 50 years (8%) and above 50 years (3%). This proves that customers beyond 40 years of age do not prefer to shop online. This could be because of rise of internet and E-commerce in last two decades in India, which makes it difficult for older customers to surf and shop online. Customers in the age group of 20 to 30 years are tech savvy and are comfortable with use of computer and internet. As per discussion with retailers, it was also realised that older customers do not find themselves comfortable with paying online. They either do not have trust on online payment systems or they are not equipped to do so. However, younger customers are not just comfortable in paying with their credit / debit cards but they also use digital wallets.

**Figure 8: Age group distribution of sample****4.2.3 OCCUPATION INFORMATION:**

From the graph below, it is pretty evident that majority of customers are either employed or students. Which means either they earn for themselves or are dependent on their family or bank loan for their studies. And since majority of customers are in the age group of 20 to 40 years, this means that their income level should range from 'less' to 'moderate'.

Occupation of sample

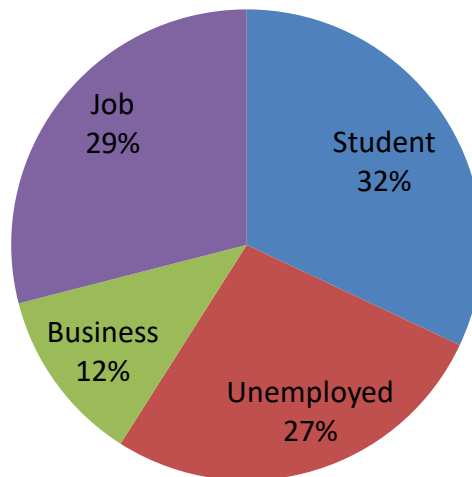


Figure 9: Occupation information of sample

4.2.4 FAMILY INCOME INFORMATION:

The graph below clearly shows that majority of customers have their annual family income in the range of 2.5 to 10 lacs. This again verifies over earlier findings where we have estimated the income range from 'less' to 'moderate'. 11% of respondents have annual family income above 10 lacs. Hence, retail stores should focus more on customers with higher income level and which have more disburseable amount in hand.

Annual Family Income

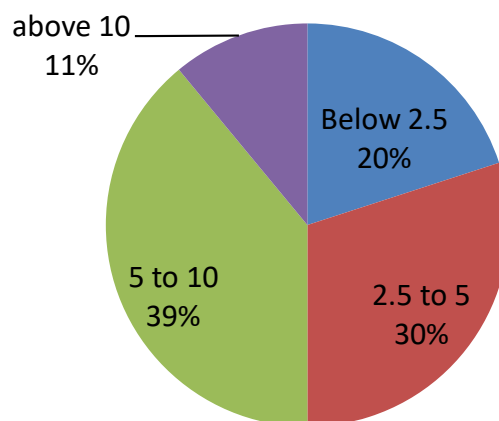


Figure 10: Annual family income information of sample

4.2.5 EDUCATION INFORMATION:

Majority of customers were found to be Graduate. 34% of respondents were found with education level of less than Graduate, this could be because these customers are student.

Highest education of respondents

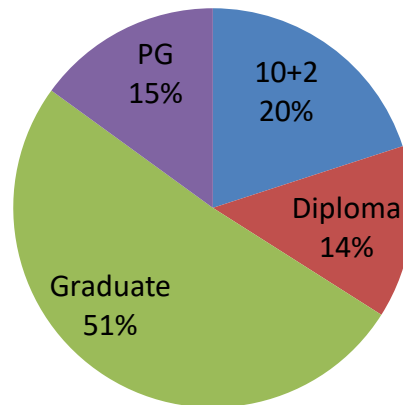


Figure 11: Educational Qualification of sample

4.2.6 FREQUENCY OF VISIT TO THE WEBSITE:

The pictorial graph below, shows that a high percentage of sample respondents, visit the online store every month. 40% of the respondents visit the online store once in three months. Hence online retailers should target and retain these customers to increase their visits.

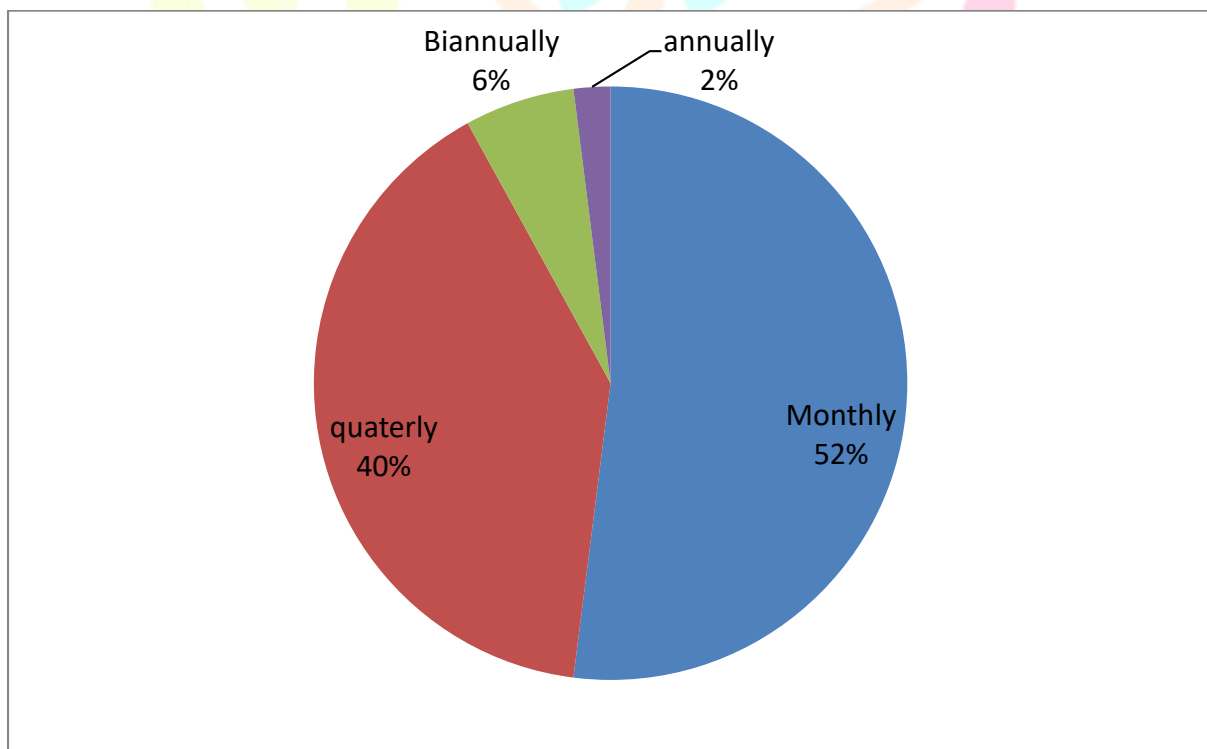


Figure 12: Frequency distribution of visit to the website

4.2.7 EXPENDITURE PER VISIT:

62% of respondents spend below Rs.2000/- on an average per visit. This is because majority of customers are price sensitive and are attracted to online stores in search of better and comparable deals. Since it is easier to compare products and their prices on online platform, customers end up buying cheaper items. Almost one third of respondents have an average billing of 2000 to 5000 Rupees. This proves scope in this segment and retailers should focus on these customers. A very small percentage of samples pay from 5000 to 10,000 rupees per visit. These purchases could be seasonal or festival.

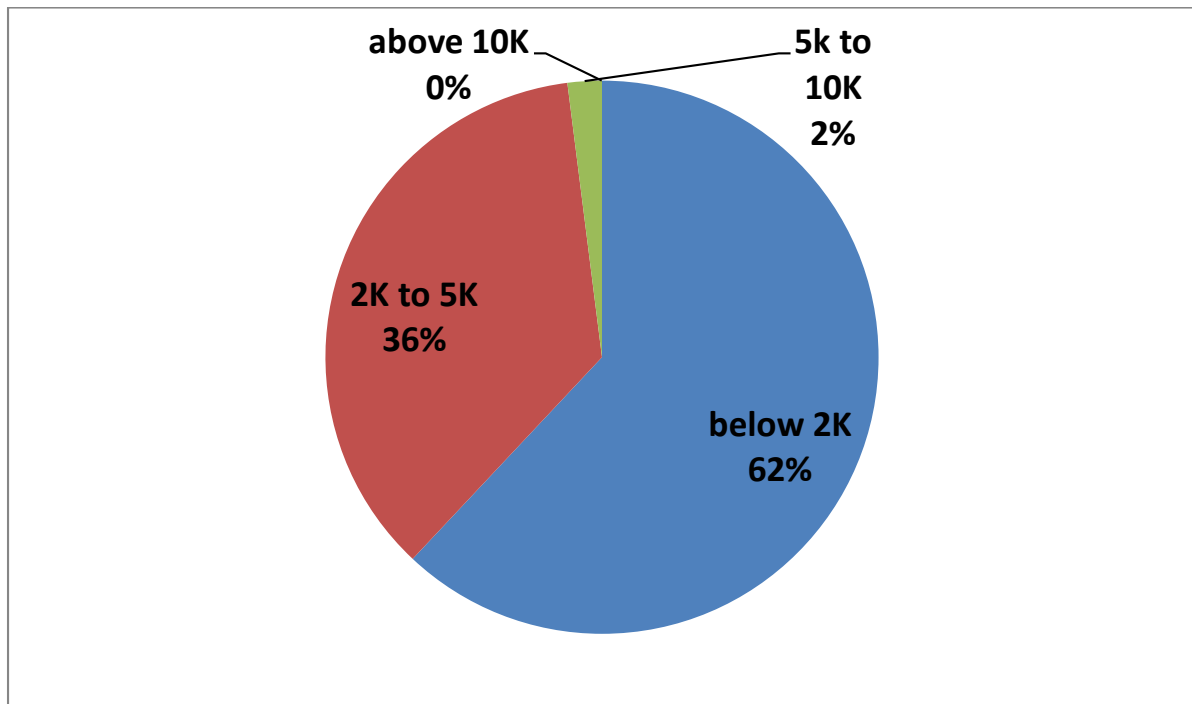


Figure 13: Average expenditure of samples per visit to website

5: RECOMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

The highly effective or influential Online Visual Merchandising Elements (OVME) of apparel retail stores (under study) were found to be Intro page, Search Filter, Brands availability and Web Graphics. Taking these highly influential factors into account, it is recommended that:

- Retailers should concentrate more on creative and interesting Intro page of the online store (web portal), which could attract attention of prospective customers who log in to the website and build a positive brand image and invite them to explore the web portal. Since Web graphics were also found to be one of the highly influential attribute of OVME, its use in website will increase its effectiveness multiple times. 'Search Filter' of the web portal should be proper and sufficient enough so as to help the online customer in reaching the correct item/product.
- Since Site map was also found to be an influential element of OVM, it is suggested to use it in a creative way with a motive of inspiring customers.
- To attract customers' attention on apparels in a web portal, multiple pictures or a short video of the product on a model can be used interestingly. There are websites where 360 degree view of the product is made available, just to stand out in the market and grab customers' attention. On the other side, web portals have started rejecting ideal body type models and adopted real life body type mannequins / models like underweight, overweight and pregnant lady body type to showcase their product.
- 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.

6: 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.

7: FUTURE RESEARCH SCOPE

- 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.
- This research was based on Premium category MBOs. Similar research on SBOs and Discount stores can also be conducted.
- 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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