VISUAL MERCHANDISING ELEMENTS: IN-STORE Vs. ONLINE

A COMPARATIVE STUDY TO EXPLORE ONLINE COUNTERPARTS OF IN-STORE VISUAL MERCHANDISING ELEMENTS

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Abstract

Purpose- This paper is the result of a scientific research which is concerned to the new and emerging field of Online Visual Merchandising. For the ease of study, the focus of this research was concentrated on online stores of Fashion and Apparel. The aim of this research is to identify, create a better taxonomy, measure the elements and sub-elements of In-Store Visual Merchandising and then compare them with elements of On-line Visual Merchandising (OVME). It is one of the first few researches in its line which is focused on Fashion and Apparel online stores operating in India.

Design / Methodology/ Approach – A comprehensive list of VME was compiled using secondary data and result of previous researches. This list was then updated and modified as per current geographical and social requirement. All such In-store VM Elements were then content analyzed and then compared with OVME. Retail Stores of 4 Multi Brand Outlets (MBO) of Fashion and Apparel in India were studied. Online Visual Merchandising Elements (OVME) have already been studied in our previous researches.

Findings- Taxonomy of VM elements has been created which can be used by researchers for further study on their impact on sales or customer perception or Brand identity. The adopted inductive approach in this research resulted into 23 Elements, which were clubbed into 2 major groups. All these VM elements were content analyzed and their frequency of usage was measured and summarized.

Research limitations- Since this study was descriptive in nature, the possible impact of VM elements on Consumer Buying Behavior cannot be studied, which can be addressed in future researches. Only 4 MBOs of major apparel retailers were content analyzed, which also limits purview of this research. This study was conducted only on 4 major Fashion and Apparel Multi Brand outlets available in India, which limits its preview both by product category and by location.

Practical implication- Using the taxonomy developed in this research about VM elements, fashion and apparel retailers will get an understanding of and insight into current usage pattern of VME and also their online counterparts. Also fashion retailers can use and emphasize on these VM elements to create the desired effect on customer attention and ultimately on sales. Offline retailers may use this research for their online interventions.

Originality / Value- A comprehensive list of VM Elements have been provided through this paper. Impact of these elements have not been identified and will be done in next part of this project. These identified 23 elements might influence customers' shopping behavior which can be studied further.

Keywords: Merchandising, Retailing, In-store Visual Merchandising, Online Visual Merchandising, OVM, VME, Apparel web store, Content analysis, Taxonomy.

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*Paper Type***:** Research Paper

1: INTRODUCTION

India is the seventh largest country in the world and home to 1.3 billion people. Internet users in India are increasing every day. In the year 2016, 29.5% of Indian population was Internet users (World Bank, 2019), which increased to 40% by the end of 2018 (The Economic Times, 2019).There are currently 273.6 million e-Commerce users in India; with rapid growth projected this figure will reach to 329.1 million by 2020 with just 36% of the total population expected by then (Statista,2019). India is the fastest growing market for E-commerce sector with highest growth rate of 51% in the world. As far as Government policy support is concern, it is worth to mention that Indian government has allowed 100% FDI in B2B E-commerce (IBEF, 2019). The average user spends 119 USD online, which will drop to 92 USD by 2020 (Eshopworld, 2019).According to Barber et. al., (2011) online shopping pattern varies by country.

According to Upadhyay *et. al.* (2023), Company websites are ubiquitous. Which means they are present everywhere at once, since they can be accessed from any part of world and by many at the same time. Purpose of company websites could be different. Some websites are just informational and provides information about the organisation, its functions, targets and achievements. Whereas others could be commercial and are made with an intention to sell merchandise / services online. Visitors to such commercial websites may browse and purchase merchandise / services from any part of the world. E-commerce has emerged as a better platform for both retailers and shoppers. On the one hand it offers better deals, information and convenience to online shoppers and on the other hand it online retailer saves capital which he otherwise would have invested in physical infrastructure. It is also easier for online retailers to handle customer demands all at one time. And since no sales representatives are required, it saves on running cost too.

However, online shops have brought some risks too for retailers- risk of losing customers too early. While shopping / browsing online, it is much easier for an online shopper to witch to another e-retailer's website / e-store, which makes it critical for e-retailers to attract and hold shoppers attention. Moreover, online shoppers can compare deals and offers while browsing which is much easier than doing it in physical stores. Internet empowers online shoppers to browse websites from any part of the world and also they can compare sales deals of same product across various websites. This liberty available with online shoppers results in retailers to struggle for shoppers' attention, which makes Visual Merchandising an important tool to attract customers in online context too (Ha, Kwon and Lennon, 2007).

1.1: RESEARCH GAP:

Although it is a proven fact now that Visual Merchandising for a retail store is a science and can impact customer behaviour (Upadhyay et. al. 2017), on the similar lines it can be derived that Online Visual Merchandising may also influence shoppers' behaviour. Today, we have a number of researches and published material in the field of Visual Merchandising and its elements for an offline environment, however not much researchers have contributed in the field of Online Visual Merchandising. In spite of having known the growth prospects of E-commerce industry, there is no book and only a few researches in the field of OVM. Study of VME for traditional apparel stores has been done extensively, but the Online Visual Merchandising Elements (OVME) were not investigated in a comprehensive manner and were never compared with In-store / Offline Visual Merchandising Elements (VME).

1.2: RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

Previous researches show that store attributes can affect shoppers' behaviour. Also with the development of retail industry, retailers have also developed both their stores and websites, to cater more customers than their competitors. This makes the researchers in this field to update the taxonomy developed earlier and re-study In-store VME in current situation.

Thus the objectives of this research are:

(a) To investigate In-store Visual Merchandising Elements (VME): This stage of project starts from the point where Rathnayaka and Madhuhansi (2017) have left it after developing the model given by Ha et. al. (2007). Outcomes of previous researches were verified and new taxonomy of VME was prepared.

(b) To measure frequency of usage of In-store VME by apparel retailers: Usage of VME by major multi brand apparel retailers of India was checked using Content Analysis. The chosen apparel retailers were Shoppers stop, Lifestyle, FBB and Reliance Trends.

(c) To compare similarities and difference between elements of In-store VM and OVM: After comparing the newly developed taxonomy for both In-Store VME and OVME, they were compared to explore similarities and differences between them and also to discover the online counterparts of In-store VME.

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).

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 color, music, lighting and retail salespeople can have a great influence on consumers' purchasing and approach-avoidance behavior. 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 behavior (Michon, Chebat & Turley, 2005). In-store music can also increase store loyalty (Walsh et al., 2011).

Upadhyay, Jauhari and Singh (2023), have studied the Online Visual Merchandising Elements (OVME) comprehensively and also content analyzed the elements for online portals of four major retailers of India. The list of OVME prepared by them, their findings and Conclusion have been used directly and as it is, in this research.

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 atmosphere Chandon et. al. (2009), Store lighting (Aspfors, 2010), shelf arrangement, window display, 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. Razzouk et. 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 (2008) 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.

In-store / Offline VM elements can be divided into two broad categories:

1. Exterior Elements of Display
2. Interior Elements of Display
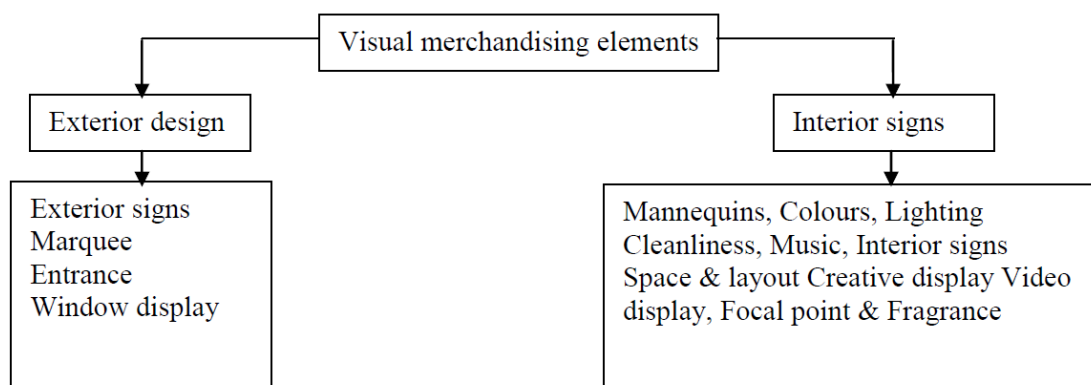
Figure 1: Categorization of In-Store / Offline Visual Merchandising Elements (VME)

2.1: EXTERIOR ELEMENTS OF DISPLAY

Exterior design elements of a store are the first few, to make a contact with customers. They are arranged in such a manner to invite maximum prospective customers, convert the passers-by into walk-ins and assure them a pleasant and comfortable shopping experience.

2.1.1 : SIGNAGE

Signage could be either exterior or interior. Exterior Signage helps your customer to identify and locate your store while interior signage helps your customer to navigate in your shop without asking the store staff.

Interior signage could be either **Informative**, like one outside washrooms or **Directional**, to help customers navigate in the store.

2.1.2 : FAÇADE:

It is a French word which means "Face". It generally implies 'face of the building/store'. It should always carry the logo and brand elements and they should be visible from street.

2.1.3: PARKING LOT:

A parking lot is one of the most important requirements of a retail store. Absence of it or limited space may lead to loss of opportunity resulting in loss of sales. It is one of the touch points in Customer Experience Management, which should be taken care of properly.

2.1.4: EXTERIOR WINDOWS:

"Historically store windows were designed to enable customers to view the retailer's offer before entering. In contemporary retailing this comprehensive selling space has a more complex commercial context. Store Windows can entertain, engage and inspire the customers, helping them to build an association and relationship with the retail brand."- Bailey and Baker (2021).

2.1.5: ENTRANCE ARCH

An Arch is an arch shaped big sized entrance created outside the store, which acts like an entrance but intended to communicate about current marketing events and promotions and it also greets the customer.

2.1.6 : ENTRANCE

As the name derives, it is the passage / gate / door which provide access to the store. Most stores have common entrance and exit however for Multi Brand Outlets or a Multi floored store in a Mall, there could be separate or multi Entrance and Exit points.

2.1.7 : FLAG POLES

Flagpoles act like signages and placed outside store/Mall or in Parking area.

2.1.8 BULK HEADS

Bulkheads are box like structure, generally used to hide something like concrete beams, electrical lines, air conditioner ducts etc. In a shop front, bulkhead could be used to hide lighting and security equipment.

2.1.9 : BAGGAGE COUNTER

Baggage Counters are arrangement done by stores to collect baggages from customers and issue a token coins in return, before entering the store. These baggages are then returned to customers in exchange of the earlier issued token coins.

2.1.10: INFLATABLE

An Inflatable is a big sized balloons which are placed in a strategic location to be visible to customers and attract them.

2.2 : INTERIOR ELEMENTS OF DISPLAY

All the elements inside a store which acts like touch points and constitute to build a better shopping experience for the customers can be collectively termed as Internal Design Elements of VM.

2.2.1: ARM TALKERS

Arm talker communicate about different price or promotion offers for merchandise at all arms of the gondola. These promotions could be same or diferent for all the arms and the merchandise on them.

2.2.2 : ATRIUM

Atrium is the large open and common ground space of the mall. It is usually used for promotional displays.

The Picture on the right shows promotions being carried out at the atrium of Capital Mall, Bhopal.

2.2.3 : DANGLERS

Ceiling Danglers are hanging signage. They can be printed in different shape, size and color as per requirement and usually hanged using transparent fish net.

2.2.4 : DROP DOWNS

As the name suggests, drop downs are something which is droping down.Usually these are big sized banners / signages dropping down from ceiling to the floor.

2.2.5 : GONDOLA HEADER

It is used to communicate about the whole gandola of merchandise. Like in the case of picture provided for arm taker, if all the arms of a gondola or pipe rack are hanged with same promotional offer, then rather putting arm takers, one Gondola header culd have been placed to communicate that all same promotional offer is applicable to all the arms / whole of the gondola.

2.2.6 : PILLARS

Pillars are atual pillars of the building, which can also be used either to display merchandise or as signage boards or SOH space.

The picture on the right shows that pillars of the store building were being used as space for branding and to communicate discount offers on various brands, during sale period.

2.2.7 : SHELF TALKERS

Shelf talkers are like arm talkers and they speak about the merchandise kept on a particular shelf.

2.2.8 : STANDEE

A standee is a large sized self standing signage used for communicating something to the customers.

2.2.9 : SIGNAGE

Signage is same as in case of external VM elements, used to educate and communicate with customers. They help them to locate a department / section / cash counters / washrooms etc. within a store.

In the picture on the right,a Signage was used at an MBO, to convey about the current discount offers on different collections of the Brand BIBA

2.2.10: SECURITY SYSTEMS

Shoplifting is a common cause of shrinkage in a retail store. Certain security measures like sensormatics / checkpoint towers, security tags, security guards etc. are done to avoid it. It prevents the merchandise from being stolen / shoplifted.

2.2.11: FLOOR DIRECTORY / MAP

It is a map of the floor, usually placed near the entrance of the store / mall or near the escalators / elevators at every floor of the store / mall, to help customers locate their required department / section in a department store or a particular brand / store in a mall.

2.2.12: STORE LAYOUT

While Floor map talks about locating a store or a department on a floor of Mall / Store, Store layout gives an idea about customer traffic flow. Store layout depends on store type and merchandise being sold.

2.2.13: SPACE ON HIRE (SOH)

SOH represents all the available retail space in a store, which can be rented to another brand for their promotion / advertisements. And this way SOH space in a store too, adds up to the earnings for the store. There could be many such SOH options inside a store, for example: side walls of magnetic sensors at the entrance, baggage counter, elevators, escalators, trial rooms, parking area etc.

2.2.14: FIXTURES AND FURNITURES

They come in different shapes and sizes and are used to display merchandise in a store. Examples of fixtures could be Pipe racks, Nesting table, Gondolas, shelves, counters etc.

2.2.15: CASH COUNTER / POS

Cash Counters are the desk where customers pay for their selected merchandise. This is also the place where bill is generated for the final payment done and security tags are removed.

2.2.16: CUSTOMER SERVICE DESK (CSD), ALTERATION AND GIFT WRAPPING COUNTER

CSD is the place where customer centric services are provided like complaints handling, alterations, returns / exchanges, gift voucher sale, loyalty membership and gift wrapping.

2.2.17: TRIAL ROOM

Trial rooms are where customers try their selected garments, to check fitting and size. It also helps you to control the 'Touch' factor among the five senses. It is suggested to allow your customers to touch and experience your merchandise.

2.2.18: COLOR BLOCKING

Color is the first element of design to be observed by customers. Most customers buy/reject color before design or size or fit. It means color is their first preference followed by size, fit and price.

2.2.19: MANNEQUIN

Mannequins are dummies, used to show merchandise being offered by store.

2.2.20   : SHOP-IN-SHOP

When one retail outlet is functioning inside another, it may be termed as Shop-in-shop.

2.2.21: WINDOW AND OTHER DISPLAYS

"Store windows can entertain, engage and inspire the customers, helping them to build an association and relationship with the retail brand."- Bailey and Baker (2021).

2.2.22: SENSORY ELEMENTS: MUSIC, AROMA AND TASTE

MUSIC: Music can make or break your mood. Music related to the store concept and merchandise collection, can help in creating overall mood of the customer.

AROMA: Smell in a store also impact mood of customer. A bad odour may definitely make a customer to leave the store. In most retail stores, a pleasant subtle aroma is maintained using some room fresheners or diffusers, unless something else is demanded by store image.

TASTE: It is usually done by stores where edible items are sold.

3: RESEARCH METHOD

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, offering both apparels and accessories and have presence pan India through their multiple outlets in various cities and E-commerce websites. 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 In-store (Offline) Visual Merchandising Elements (VME) of these 4 Multi Brand stores are comparable. The research method used for this project is Content Analysis. We verified the coding structure used by earlier researchers and reorganized this structure to match the current needs of Indian shopper.

Upadhyay, Jauhari and Singh (2023), in their research paper namely "A STUDY OF ELEMENTS OF ONLINE VISUAL MERCHANDISING (OVME) FOR WEBSITES OF INDIAN APPAREL RETAILERS" have studied the Online Visual Merchandising Elements (OVME) comprehensively and also content analyzed the elements for online portals of four major retailers of India. The list of OVME prepared by them, their findings and Conclusion have been used directly and as it is, in this research.

4: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF IN-STORE VME

The table below shows content analysis on stores of four apparel retailers (under study) in India – Shoppers Stop, Lifestyle, Reliance Trends and Fashion at Big Bazaar. Presence of any element is marked as '1' and absence is marked as '0'.

Table 4.1: Content Analysis for In-store VME on four retail stores

(Developed by Researcher)

Offline VM Elements	Shoppers Stop	Lifestyle	Reliance Trends	FBB
EXTERIOR ELEMENTS				
Signage	1	1	1	1
Façade	1	1	1	1
Parking lot	1	1	1	1
Exterior Windows	1	1	1	1
Entrance Arch	1	1	0	0
Entrance	1	1	1	1
Flag Poles	0	1	0	0
Bulk Heads	1	1	1	1
Baggage Counter	1	1	1	1
Inflatables	0	1	0	0
INTERIOR ELEMENTS				
Arm Talkers	1	1	1	1
Atrium	0	1	0	0
Danglers	1	1	1	1
Drop Downs	1	1	0	0
Gondola Headers	1	1	1	0
Pillars	1	1	1	1
Shelf Talkers	1	1	1	1
Standee	1	1	1	1
Signage	1	1	1	1
Security System	1	1	1	1
Floor Directory/Map	1	1	0	0
Store Layout	1	1	0	0
Space on Hire	1	1	0	0
Fixtures and Furniture	1	1	1	1
Cash Counter	1	1	1	1
CSD/Alteration/Gift Wrapping	1	1	1	1
Trial Room	1	1	1	1
Mannequin	1	1	1	1
Promotional / Island Display	1	1	1	1
Music	1	1	1	1
Aroma	1	1	1	1
Taste	0	0	0	0
Temperature	1	1	1	1

4.1.1: ANALYSIS OF EXTERIOR VM ELEMENTS:

From the table 4.1 it was observed that:

- Most of the External VM Elements of a store have been used by all the four retailers.
- Since all four retailer brands are competitors of one another and offer similar products, targeted for same customer group, their store size and number of merchandise offerings are also similar. Hence they ought to have big stores with multiple floors. And since they target and offer merchandise for all the age groups and holds a huge range of merchandise, all the stores under study expect huge customer traffic.
- Because of this huge customer traffic in these stores, they all provide parking facility in all of their stores.
- Big store sizes enable these retailers to showcase their latest merchandise on window displays.
- 'Entrance arch' was not found to be a common VM element. It was found that arches at entrance is used occasionally, only during festive seasons or promotional / sale period. It was also found that Shoppers stop and lifestyle use Entrance arch more frequently than their competitors.
- Use of 'Flag Poles' was found in restricted manner. Reason behind this is most of the stores are located in a mall where parking is common for all the stores. This restricts the use of parking space or space around mall.
- Facility of 'Baggage counter' is provided by all the retailers at all the stores, due to security reasons and also for the convenience of the customers.
- 'Inflatables' was found to be a rare element, may be because of its high cost and space requirement.

4.1.2: ANALYSIS OF INTERIOR VM ELEMENTS:

From the table 4.1 it was found that:

- Almost all the VM elements have been used by all the four retailer stores under study.
- Use of atriums, drop downs, Floor Map, Store layout and space on hire depends on store size and location, and also if the retailer's store have its independent building or a rented space in a mall.
- 'Taste' as a VM element was not used by any of the stores, as they all deals in apparels and thus this feature is irrelevant here.

4.2: COMPARITIVE ANALYSIS OF VM ELEMENTS

Elements of Online Visual Merchandising were listed out and found to be much more than elements of Offline VM because in a physical retail store there are sales staffs, customer service staff to inform customers about product, policies and help them with services etc. whereas in an online store a retailer can interact with customer only through visual content. Hence everything has to be written or shown graphically to make customers aware and help them shop online.

Table 4.2: Taxonomy of VM Elements: Offline and Online.

(Developed by Researcher)

IN-STORE / OFFLINE VM ELEMENTS	ONLINE VM ELEMENTS
1. EXTERIOR ELEMENTS:	**1. LTRE**
Signage	**1.1 REGISTRATION PROCESS**
Façade	Personal and demographic data of customers
Parking lot	Sign-in & Sign-up
Exterior Windows	Bank Account Details
Entrance Arch	**1.2 ATMOSPHERICS**
Entrance	Background Color
Flag Poles	Intro Music
Bulk Heads	Background Music
Baggage Counter	Intro Page
Inflatable	Font Size
2. INTERIOR ELEMENTS:	Font Color
Arm Talkers	Sale / Promotion Signage
Atrium	Hyperlinks
Danglers	**1.3 INTERACTIVITY**
Drop Downs	Support Tools

Gondola Headers	Software Downloads
Pillars	Order Confirmation
Shelf Talkers	Feedback
Standee	Order history
Signage	recommended product list
Security System	Customer reviews
Floor Directory/Map	Personalized messages
Store Layout	FAQs
Space on Hire	Creating & saving shopping list
Fixtures and Furniture	Shipping availability
Cash Counter	Shipping cost indication
CSD/Alteration/Gift Wrapping	International shipping information Delivery term indication
Trial Room	Selling agency information
Mannequin	Help Desk
Promotional / Island Display	Feedback
Music	Complaint
Aroma	Return / exchange / cancellation Policy
Taste	Customer Reviews
Temperature	Add to kart
Touch	Wish list
Digital Screens	Guarantee / Warranty
	Contact details
	Social media links
	1.4 WEB ADVERTISING
	Banner ads and texts
	Offers and promotional messages
	Flash Sale
	1. HTRE
	2.1 WEB NAVIGATION & CONVENIENCE
	Site map
	Search Engine / tools
	Keyword search
	Search history
	Product Catalogue / listing
	Brand Catalogue
	Hyperlinks
	Payment Options / Gateway
	Price information
	Delivery Options
	Packaging and delivery cost
	2.2 WEB GRAPHICS
	Website Orientation
	Banner – click-on, pop-up, dynamic, static
	Click buttons
	Fonts type, size and color

	Web layout
	2.3 PRODUCT DEMONSTRATION
	Product views
	Image enlargement
	Color& size option
	Display method
	Mix and Match
	Virtual Trial rooms
	3-D display
	360 degree display
	Image – Static / kinetic
	Presentation style: models / mannequin / hanger / table top
	Product / demonstration video
	2.4 PRODUCT INFORMATION
	Manufacturing specifications
	Ironing / Laundry specifications
	Stock availability
	Fiber content composition
	Color options
	Offer detail indication
	Breadth and Depth of the merchandise
	Product size and weight

When we have a comprehensive list of both Offline and Online VM Elements, all the four apparel retail stores under study were content analyzed to check which all elements are being used by these stores. Content analysis of both online and offline platforms of apparel retailers under study resulted in the finding that almost all the elements are common in these stores / websites, with small occasional changes here and there.

Content analysis of VM Elements of physical stores cannot give direct results, as it only provides information about presence/ absence of any VM element but it does not tell us about the quality and position of the elements in the store. Comparison of VM Elements on both Offline and Online platform of a retail store, only on the basis of content analysis, also does not suffice, because unlike online store, use of VME in a physical store is backed up by space and funds availability. For example, while studying OVME (Upadhyay et. al., 2023) it was realized that all the stores used human model to display their apparels. A human model once hired for a day, may be used to get photographs with multiple merchandise, thus reducing the cost of display of merchandise per piece. However, use of human models in physical stores is not possible, because of its financial implications. Hence mannequins are used. But mannequins too, cost a lot as their per piece cost may vary from Rs. 2000/- to Rs. 2,00,000/-. Hence, retailers have to work out on quantity requirement, type, quality, Cost of mannequins and funds available, which may affect their use in physical stores.

It was also noted that although all of these retailers under study use 'Background Music' as VM element in their physical stores but none of them use 'Intro Music' or 'Background Music' on their online stores / websites. This might be done to make website lighter and to reduce the website loading time.

Most of the Offline and Online VM elements have same function: bringing in customers and increasing sales (Then and DeLong, 1999). Irrespective of the platform, whether it is an In-store VM or OVM, the ultimate goal of VM is to attract customers, invite them in and help them enjoy the shopping process. Ha et al. (2007) revealed that many VMD features of offline stores have been implemented online. In addition, some VMD features of online apparel stores do not have a direct offline parallel. However both Offline and Online stores have their unique advantages and disadvantages. Online stores have an upper hand with better interactivity with customers, spontaneous response to their individual shopping pattern, privacy and convenience. However there are equally bigger challenges for online stores like customers personal information security, dependency on delivery system and delivery time, discrepancy between actual product and displayed image, 2D screen instead of 3D environment etc.

Instore attribute like store layout and department directory are analogous to site maps and search engines of a website, which makes it easier for customer to identify and locate his shopping list items. Such OVM elements makes the website more useful (Rangnathan and Ganpathy, 2002) and satisfying (Szymanski and Hise, 2000). Other Instore attributes like music and window displays attract customers and invite them in (Sen et al., 2002) and also these attributes are analogous to background music and colourful pictures and videos on a website of an online store, which serves the same purpose (Harris, 1998). Banners, tags and

pop-up ads on an online store serve the same function as of signage in a store. Background colors and images of an online store can create its image as is done by color themes, façade, window display and entrance in a physical store.

Online stores have a limitation. Unlike physical stores, they cannot use sensory experience of smell, touch and taste. And hence they have to rely heavily on just visuals and sound, to communicate with the customers, which makes role of Visual Merchandising more important in online environment than its physical counterpart. A very big issue with online shopping is unlike physical stores, customers cannot try garments before they buy (Kim & Lennon, 2000; Kwon, Park, & Arzeni, 1991; Park, Lennon, & Stoel, 2005). There is no trial room in an online store. However innovators of this E-Commerce industry have introduced some sort of digital trial rooms to provide an analogous facility on online portal too. These digital trail rooms collect customer's picture and then overlap it with the picture of the garment to make it look like customer is wearing it. This inability to try clothes at online portal is a major hurdle for many online shoppers (Reda, 2002). Park et al. (2005) found that perceived risk and apparel purchase intentions are inversely proportional, which means with reduced perceived risks, we should expect higher consumers' purchase intentions.

Table 4.3: Elements of Offline VM having similar online counterpart

(Developed by Researcher)

S. No.	OFFLINE / IN-STORE VME	ONLINE VME	EXPLANATION
1	Signage	Pop-up messages and banner	Serves the same function of communicating a message
2	In-store Music	Intro and Background Music	However, music was not used by retailers under study in this research, to keep website lighter and reduce its loading time.
3	Window Display	Intro Page	Serves the same function of giving a glimpse of the store offerings
4	Floor Directory / Map	Site Map	Helps customers to explore the store / website
5	Store Layout	Website Layout / Orientation	Helps customers to locate merchandise / brands
6	Space on Hire	Banner Ads	It provides space unused by retailer to lend on rent for advertisements by third party.
7	Cash Counter	Payment Gateway	To pay for the merchandise bought
8	CSD / Alteration / Gift Wrapping	Help Desk / Customer Feedback / Complaint / Exchange	These are the nodes which helps in communication with the customers
9	Trial Room	Virtual Trial Room	It helps the customer to try the garment to check size, fit and look.
10	Mannequins	Human Model, 3-D Display, 360 degree display	Used to display garments / products
11	Digital Screens	Product Demonstrational Pictures / Video	Pictures / videos of the product demonstration can be played to educate the customers.

Table 4.4: Elements of Offline and Online VM, not having counterpart on another platform

(Developed by Researcher)

S. NO.	OFFLINE VME	ONLINE VME	NEAREST POSSIBILITY	EXPLANATION
1	Taste	NA	NA	Edible items can be tasted only at a physical store, that too when retailer provided this facility.
2	Aroma	NA	NA	Customer cannot smell over internet.
3	Touch	NA	Order, Receive and return if not liked	Merchandise can be touched only when it is physically available. However, if a customer really wants to touch merchandise on online platform, he has to order and pay for it and when it is received, he can open and touch the product. And if the customer is still not satisfied with the feel, he can return

				the product and get the refund, only if the Online store's return policy allow this.
4	NA	Human Model	Mannequins, dummies, Hangers, Lay down technique, cut outs etc.	Human Model are best option to display the size, fit, fall and overall look of the garment. A human model gives a realistic look over a mannequin. Since an online store only use pictures / videos to demonstrate product, it only has to pay once for the photo / video shoot and the model. Also same human model can be used for multiple items. Whereas using human models to display garments / accessories in a physical store, every working day of the year and for multiple items at multiple locations in the store, would be extremely expensive.
5	NA	Registration Process / Personal details	Membership plan / Loyalty programme / Reward Points	Pre-Registration is not compulsory for most of the online stores however, to confirm an order, user registration / login is required by all the websites. Also personal details like name, address and contact number of the receiver of the item, has to be provided by the customer. On the contrary, registration is not mandatory for Offline stores. Even to complete the purchase process, customers are not asked about their personal details. However, offline retailer might suggest a customer to register for Membership / loyalty plan which can earn him points on every purchase / avail discounts on future purchases.
6	NA	Product Reviews by Customer	Customer Feedback register at CSD	Online stores usually provide this facility of customer reviews on items sold by them. This enables the new customer to compare different products / brands and to decide. However, in a physical store, there is not product / brand wise review available. The most a customer can check is Customer Feedback register, available at Customer Service Desk / Cash Counters, only it the retail store maintains this facility. And also it feedbacks could be about the whole store and not just about a particular item / brand.
7	NA	Hyperlinks	NA	Hyperlinks help an online customer to jump to a new position in a website directly. However, in a physical store one cannot jump to another location like this. Offline retailers use this drawback in a positive sense, by purposefully making the customer to move around / walk through the store and get acquainted with the store's offerings.
8	NA	Order History	Customer registration	Order history can be recorded only for a registered customer for both the platforms. Since registration is compulsory on online shopping hence order history is available for an online shopper and may not be available for an offline shopper if he is not registered with the store.
9	NA	Personalized Messages	Emails / text messages	As soon as an online store customer logs in the website, he is recognized, his order history is reviewed and on the basis of his shopping and surfing pattern, he is suggested with new items on the store, by the website. Since registration is not compulsory for Offline shopping, no personalized messages can be sent by retailer to customer, if he is not registered. In case of registered customers, a physical store retailer might send him personalized messages through email or text messages or product catalogue on the registered address.
10	NA	Wish List	Feedback register	Wish list is a list of items which an online shopper wishes to buy in future. It can be preserved by the retailer website only if the customer is registered. On the one hand it helps the customer to remember what is to be bought in future when available, on the other hand it helps the retailer to know what is sold out and is to be refilled. However in a physical store, a customer can write in the feedback register and inform the retailer about the requirement of an item which is not available in the store currently.
11	NA	Social Media Links	NA	Like Hyperlinks, Social media links can lead an online customer directly to the social media page of the retailer. However in a physical store, no links can be provided. 'Lifestyle' has introduced a new 'Likable' window where customer can push

				the touch button provided and increase the like count of the window.
12	NA	Search Engine / Tool	Ask a sales staff / Customer Service Desk	Search engine at a online store, helps the customer to search about a particular product / brand and can reach out to it directly, without wasting time on surfing the website. There is no facility available for Offline stores. On the contrary, sometimes department stores / supermarkets make the customers to move around the store and get exposed to more and more merchandise displayed in the store because it increases impulse buying. If a customer is not interested in exploring a store and want to save time and reach out to the item directly, he may take help of the sales staff and get guided to reach the item in the store.
13	NA	Search History	NA	Search history is only maintained for registered online customers. Even if a customer is registered for an Offline store, his search history is not recorded.
14	NA	Product / Brand catalogue	Floor Directory	Product Catalogue / Brand Catalogue is generally provided by all the online retailers on their website. It helps the customer to learn about all the items / brands along with its categories, sizes, colour and their availability etc. being offered by an online store. Since the website is digital, such facility doesn't cost much and can be altered in real-time by the website or retailer as per availability of the product. However, such facility is not provided in a physical store and a customer has to explore and interact with the sales staff to know about this. Occasionally, an offline retailer might provide a fraction of this information in the form of standees / pamphlets / catalogue etc. A product catalogue may also be provided on customer demand, if provided to the retailer by the manufacturer. Floor directory in a physical store can also educate the customer about the brands available and their location in the store.

- Note: NA denotes Not Available

5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1: CONCLUSION OF CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BOTH OFFLINE AND ONLINE VME:

With content analysis of VMEs for Offline VM, a great level of similarity has been found among the retailers, in terms of usage of elements. Whereas, they differ in the case of Online VM Elements. The probable reasons are:

1. VM at store level is performed by a team of Visual Merchandisers, specially trained in this field and employed by the retailer. Whereas, OVM is generally taken care by website developer itself, which is a third party service provider, most of the time.
2. There are laid down rules or Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) by the retailers for VM of a physical store. Whereas, there is no structured guidelines for OVM, which gives liberty to the third party web developer / graphic designer to work on its own and thus create dissimilarities.
3. In case of Offline retailing, a customer cannot compare all the retailers' VM at one point of time and at same place. However in case of Online VM, a customer can access websites of all the possible retailers at the same time and at the same place. Hence, OVM of retailers are made different purposefully to stand out among competitors.
4. VM for physical store is an age old concept and has been accepted as an influence of customer behaviour and sales of the store. However, OVM is a comparatively much newer concept and is still under research and development.
5. Retailers have not accepted OVM as part of retail marketing in most cases. They consider it to be responsibility of web developer.
6. Information Technology is evolving every day, which gives retailers freedom to adopt newer and more advanced technologies for their website to reach out to most of the customer group. However VM facilities and technology for physical stores do not advance with such great pace. Hence retailers keep trying newer IT developments which create the difference.

5.2: RECOMMENDATION

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 (Upadhyay et. al., 2023). 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.

6: LIMITATIONS

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

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, Discount stores, Super Markets and other stores can also be conducted.

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