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Retailer's awareness regarding use of visual merchandising in apparel retail stores

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Abstract
The survey regarding retailers' awareness about use of visual merchandising in apparel retail stores was conducted in four zones of Ludhiana city. Ten apparel retail stores from each zone (total 40) were selected randomly. An interview schedule was used for collecting the data from the selected stores. The results indicated that maximum percentage of retailers belong to age group of 20-30 years and they were male visual merchandisers. Majority of respondents believe that visual merchandising aids in consumer attraction and with weighted mean score of 125.8 got first rank. The most significant criteria of visual merchandising is theme presentation, which was ranked first with weighted mean score of 194.28. Visual merchandising entails strategies for attracting customers into a business in order to boost footfalls, which was ranked first by respondents with weighted mean score of 163.54. Around 35 percent of the retailers were inspired from their past experiences followed by 25 percent of retailers, who were inspired by the particular websites. The majority of respondents believed that visual merchandising activities enhanced foot traffic to the store, which led to an increase in sales turnover at the retail business.

Keywords: Visual merchandising, retailers, consumer, window display, retail stores

Introduction
In today's world, visual merchandising is becoming the important marketing tool for retailers to increase the sales by encouraging planned and impulsive buying. The retailers need to understand the concept of fashion and brand image, their target customers and product range for effective application of the visual merchandising elements. They also get insights about how they can present the merchandise range in a best way to drive more sales. It is the use of all the physical elements in a store to provide the right image to customers. It is not only about increasing the sales and encouraging customers to enter a store but also to make them feel comfortable and have a good shopping experience. Visual merchandising creates good brand image and also set the business apart from the competitors. As in today's market, it is important to use some innovative techniques to increase the sales, and visual merchandising help in completing the purpose (Soundhariya and Sathyan 2015) [14]. The main objective of visual merchandising is to increase the business efficiency by creating a comfortable and attractive store environment which leads to increase in sales (Kim 2013) [4].

Visual merchandising refers to as an interaction between the store or company values with its customers. The main motive of visual merchandising is to make the customers allure about the sales and the current fashion prevailing in the market by displaying garments along with accessories. Decorative glass store fronts, colorful signs, creative window displays, lighting, carpeting and brightly painted walls are all part and parcel to make the store more attractive and invite more customers (Choudhary 2016) [1]. The good visual merchandising plan will guide the company to easily achieve the brand image with its target customers. The use of visual merchandising elements in store like window display and mannequins help to earn loyalty and driving the shoppers into long term customers. The boutique can also be easily setup with the help of visual merchandising which save the time and money (Gudonaviciene & Alijosiene 2015). The effective visual merchandising becomes the powerful selling tool which attracts the customer to enter in a store and make a purchase. Visual merchandising creates the favourable store atmosphere which increases the sales. It includes both favourable presentation and customer's attitude (Law *et al.* 2012) [6].

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In this era, every retailer wants to attract the customer towards their store. They are using visual merchandising elements like store front, window display, lights, music and scent which attracts the customer to enter in the store and also has influence on their shopping behaviour. Visual merchandising generates the feeling of excitement in customers which leads to impulsive buying. The concepts of visual merchandising arise as a major means that helps the retailers to design and develop a creative environment for shopping (Sudhakaran and Nath 2018) [15]. The primary factors that are included in the visual merchandising are lighting, colours, shelving of the products, floor layout etc. as all these attract the attention of customers and enhance the impact of visual merchandising. The main objective is to highlight all the products in right manner that can attract the customer and also communicate the attributes of the product effectively (Pegler 2011) [10].

With the increasing competition in the retail industry, visual merchandising is the most effective aspect in apparel and retail industry. Now a days, only selling the product is not important but customer's satisfaction, experience and comfortable environment are also the key influencers for shopping. Shopping is no more a bag of merchandise but it's a bag of experiences. Visual merchandising is also known as 'silent sales person' that provide the information to consumer through visual presentation (Pegler 2011) [10]. Hence the present survey was planned to study the awareness of retailers about visual merchandising used in apparel retail stores.

Materials and Methods
The present study was conducted in Ludhiana city which was divided into four zones namely: Municipal Corporation Zone A, Mata Rani Chowk, Ludhiana, Municipal Corporation Zone B, Backside Shingar Cinema, Ludhiana, Municipal Corporation Zone C, Near Gill Chowk, Ludhiana Municipal Corporation Zone D, Sarabha Nagar, Ludhiana. Different apparel retail stores from the four zones of Ludhiana were selected. A total of 40 apparel retail stores (10 stores from each zone) were selected randomly for this study. A survey method was used to collect the data from retailers.

An interview schedule was developed for obtaining the information from the retailers of different apparel retail stores regarding their awareness for the visual merchandising practices. The information collected through the interview schedule was coded and tallied. The results were interpreted using percentages and weighted mean score. Also, Kruskal-Wallis test was applied to know about the significant difference between the ranks.

Results and Discussion
Data in Table 3.1 depicts socio personal traits of retailers on the basis of experience in the retail field and designation in the retail store. The collected data revealed that majority of respondents (72.50%) belonged to the age group of 20-30 years and rest of them (27.50%) belonged to 30-40 years of age. The age pattern reveals that majority of respondents have maximum experience in the retail field and they have faced all good and bad consequences of marketing strategy. The data also revealed that majority of males (92.50%) were appointed as store manager followed by only 7.50 percent of female respondents as a store manager. A retail manager (or store manager) is the person who is fully in charge of day-to-day operations in a retail business. It was also observed that majority of the respondents (87.50 %) were male visual merchandisers whereas only 12.50 percent were female visual merchandisers.

Table 3.1: Distribution of retailers on the basis of their socio-personal traits (n = 40).

Age (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
20-30	29	72.50
30-40	11	27.50
Designation		
Store manager (Male)	37	92.50
Store manager (Female)	3	7.50
Visual merchandiser (Male)	35	87.50
Visual merchandiser (Female)	5	12.50
Experience		
Below 5 years	15	37.50
5 to 10 years	22	55.00
More than 10 years	3	7.50

It was reported that most of the work was done by store managers and they get approval for marketing plans and presentations for visual merchandising from the higher authorities. Regarding experience in the retail field, it was found that around 55 percent of respondents have 5 to 10 years of experience followed by 37.50 percent of the respondents who had below five years of experience. Only very few percentage of the respondents had more than 10 years of experience in the retail field. The reason for apparel being the most important merchandise in the selected stores was perhaps due to purposive selection of stores dealing in soft line products.
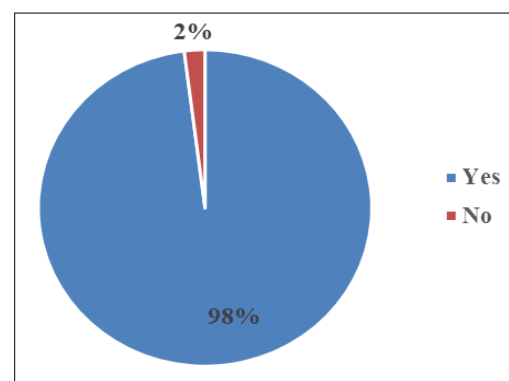
(n = 40)

Fig 3.2: Awareness about benefits of visual merchandising.

Data in Figure 3.2 revealed that that majority of respondents were aware about the benefits of visual merchandising activities followed by only 2 percent of respondents who were not aware about the visual merchandising activities.

Visual merchandising is a type of marketing in which colour, lighting technology, and displays are used to attract customers. When executed successfully, this method may improve the appearance of store, allowing it to stand out in a crowded market and provide various benefits to the store like increasing footfalls, attracting more customers and increase in sales. According to Table 3.3, majority of respondents believe that visual merchandising aids in consumer attraction and with weighted mean score of 125.85 it stood first in ranking. According to them, the goal of visual merchandising is to attract, engage, and encourage people to make a purchase. Creating magic to increase footfalls got second rank with the weighted mean score of 89.80 as reported by respondents that works like magic to improve footfalls by enticing visitors inside the store with beautiful window displays.

Table 3.3: Benefits of visual merchandising according to retailers (n = 40).

Benefits	WMS	Rank
Attracting customer	125.85	I
Creating magic to increase footfalls	89.80	II
Displaying merchandise with effective presentation	66.08	III
Planning & displaying	40.28	IV
Chi square	78.894*	

WMS- Weighted mean score.
*Significant at 1 percent level of significance.

Most of the respondents stated that it all comes down to preparing and exhibiting the product through external and interior presentations. They stated that delivering the appropriate assortment in the right number and presenting it in the right area was more essential in making the product available to buyers. So, displaying merchandise with effective presentation got the third rank with weighted mean score of 66.08 followed by planning and displaying which was at fourth rank with weighted mean score of 40.28, because they feel that visual marketing was all about showcasing products with the use of props and fixtures to draw attention to the merchandise.

Singh *et al.* (2018) [13] found that visual merchandising is especially important for major retail service providers. Large merchants pay close attention to visual merchandising in order to differentiate their offerings from those of their competitors in the market. Shoppers may also benefit from visual merchandising by using targeted visual merchandising, effective store layout and design, product packaging, product displays, shelving, and signage in the store.

Table 3.4: Important parameters of visual merchandising according to retailers (n = 40).

Parameters	WMS	Rank
Assortment planning	106.95	V
Mannequins' and fixtures planning	147.78	II
Space management	115.78	IV
Theme displays	194.28	I
Use of music, colour, light and perfume	24.45	VI
Windows and POP displays	133.78	III
Chi square	134.819*	

WMS- Weighted mean score.
*Significant at 1 percent level of significance.

The data in Table 3.4 demonstrates that the most significant criteria of visual merchandising is theme presentation, which was ranked first with weighted mean score of 194.28. According to the merchants, theme displays catch people's imaginations, and a good theme will entice a consumer in the mood to purchase inside the store. Another significant criterion was mannequin and fixture planning that was ranked second with weighted mean score value of 147.78. Mannequins are wrapped in the most stylish clothing available at the store and are capable of attracting a large number of potential consumers. They are the most commonly used visual merchandising props in fashion. Customers are guided around the shop by the design of the fixtures, the positioning of products, and the fixtures on the floor.
Windows and POP displays were given third rank by retailers. According to the merchants, well-designed window displays stimulate spontaneous purchases and enhance customer curiosity. Space management got the fourth rank with weighted mean score of 115.78. They believed that space design is critical to the success of any retail shop since space is the most expensive investment in retail. It allows for a

seamless and efficient consumer flow into and through the business. Assortment planning with weighted mean score of 106.9 got fifth rank as merchants believe that visual merchandising aids or simplifies the purchasing process of customers. Retailers believe that presenting products in its correct range simplifies customer decision making and aids them in their purchasing process. Colour, lighting and music were given sixth rank with weighted mean score of 24.4 because they draw attention of the consumers and inspire more people into the business.

Dhyani (2008) [2] explains that retailers have begun to pay attention on how the store appears and how the items were grouped logically in order to attract customers. It was found that the display of items in retail establishments has a significant impact on the customer's purchasing decision process. From the perspective of merchants, visual marketing has a significant impact on the quantity of footballs sold. A business should have an attractive aesthetics that helps the consumer feel at ease while also making them want to buy. Visual merchandising was a key component in the success or failure of a retail business that is sometimes neglected.

Table 3.5: Important considerations in making visual merchandising strategy (n = 40).

Factors	WMS	Rank
Attracting more customers	163.54	1
Increasing footfalls	132.68	2
Increasing sales per square feet	25.56	5
Making product accessible to customers	86.88	4
Simplifying customers buying process	93.85	3
Chi square	135.006*	

WMS- Weighted mean score.
*Significant at 1 percent level of significance.

Data in Table 3.5 elucidates the findings of the important factors of visual merchandising strategy and describes that the primary goal of visual merchandising is to draw people to a location of business in order to sell the product. Visual merchandising entails strategies for attracting customers into a business in order to boost footfalls, which was ranked first by respondents with weighted mean score of 163.54. They stated that they are utilising all strategies to attract the customer, such as bringing in theme displays, changing window displays according to seasons and festivals, emphasising merchandise with bright colours, using graphics and design to display the latest trend, playing popular music in the store, and so on.
Increasing footfalls was ranked second with weighted mean score of 132.68 as respondents stated that they create beautiful theme displays and provide attractive store front which entice the customer to the store. Simplifying the purchasing process for customers was ranked third as retailers stated that they identify the customer barrier and try their best to solve them which makes the customer a potential buyer as they get impressed by the services of the store. Making product accessible to customers was ranked fourth as retailers opined that they want to make product easily accessible to the customers, so that they feel more comfortable during the shopping. Increasing sales per square feet was ranked fifth and given very less importance by retailers as they were of the view that increasing footfall by enticing customer through creative window displays automatically increase the sales.
Krishnakumar (2014) [5] found that attracting more customer and increasing footfalls through visual merchandising practice like graphics and signage, fixtures, props, lighting and space

management have significant relation with each other. It was observed that visual merchandising attracts more consumers, boost traffic in the business, and eventually increase sales statistics that will pamper the bottom line.
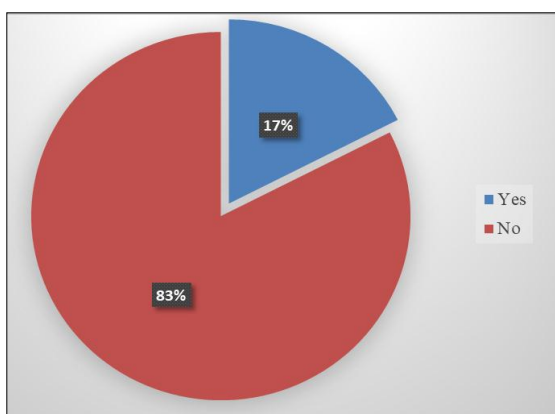

(n = 40)

Fig 3.6: Hiring of visual merchandiser by the selected retail stores.

The data in Figure 3.6 revealed that majority of retail stores (83%) does not hire the visual merchandiser for planning the layout of store whereas only 17 percent hired the visual merchandiser for the store. This shows that very few of the retail stores hire the visual merchandisers and all the work is done by retailer. Visual Merchandisers show, organise, and display things in storefronts and shop windows in critical areas where buyers may see, choose and purchase products. Main work of the visual merchandiser in the retail store is to make the store attractive and creative so that it attracts the customer and increase footfalls. It was found that most of the store managers either themselves complete the work of visual merchandiser or their higher authority/owner gives them presentations according to which they plan and complete the work.

Opriş & Brătucu (2013) states that being a Visual merchandiser is not a simple profession; one must always think ahead of trends, have a sense of colour, and understand how to employ light to entice visitors into the store with just one glimpse. Nowadays, a successful shopkeeper understands that his role extends beyond simply selling. He also has responsibilities such as informing, researching, teaching, and communicating with his market. Mehta and Chugan (2015) found the same that visual merchandising is still in its developmental stage in India. Several retail establishments are engaging expert visual merchandisers to handle innovative merchandise presentation. In addition to these visual merchandisers, the marketing and operational teams collaborate to improve retail merchandise presentation.
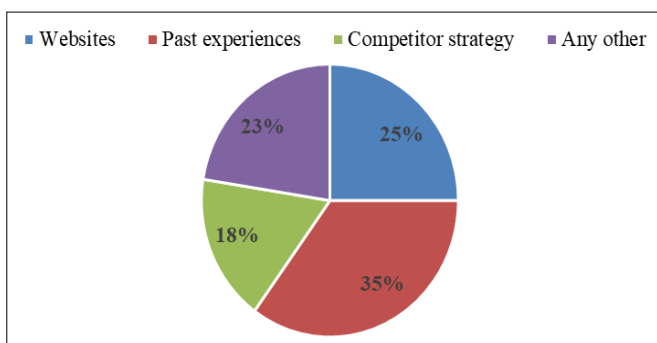
(n = 40)

Fig 3.7: Sources of inspiration for visual merchandising.

A retailer always has to think big and out of the box to meet the needs and requirements of their customers or to attract new customers. Visual merchandising is an activity in which floor layouts, colours, lighting, displays and technology are employed to capture attention of customers. The aim is ultimately to leverage the shop area to create additional sales.

Figure 3.7 revealed that 35 percent of the retailers were inspired from their past experiences followed by 25 percent of retailers who were inspired by the particular websites. Getting ideas from the competitor's strategy was interesting thing to be known. So, it was found that 17 percent of retailers take the ideas from their competitors' strategy. They usually take a look upon their competitors so that they can get to know about their flaws and appreciate their good work. Any other option includes getting ideas from daily life activities, by thinking out of the box and creativity of one's mind. Around 23 percent of retailers think out of the box to get new ideas for the unique creation of visual merchandising elements.

Opriş & Brătucu (2013) reported that consumer expectations for window design have risen, implying that the general public is more informed and always looking for something fresh and intriguing. Knowing your audience, their expectations, and their aspirations is required to provide these services. The window display is an essential and low-cost marketing technique. Its function is to display items and the brand, as well as to convert passers-by into consumers. It was found that it's not easy to design an eye-catching window; a retailer must establish a theme for the window, adjust the lighting, and select what colour to use for exhibit.

Table 3.8: Elements required for effective visual merchandising (n = 40).

| Elements	Frequency	Percentage
Advance & creative fixtures	12	30.00
Creative graphics & signage	6	15.00
Theme based displays	26	65.00
Use of decorative props	3	7.50

Data in Table 3.8 revealed that every element of visual merchandising plays a different role in attracting the customers and enhancing the store atmosphere. It was observed that 65 percent of respondents stated that theme displays were the most important element because a well-themed display may lure visitors into the store by generating a tale or ambition for them to acquire the items. According to 30 percent of respondents, the usage of advanced and innovative fixtures was the most significant necessity for strengthening and developing an effective visual merchandising strategy. Designer shop fixtures were critical for improving the appearance of the fashion store. They aid in keeping the garments more ordered while providing greater visibility.

Further, it was seen that 15 percent of retail stores considered creative graphics and signage as vital element of visual merchandising, because excellent signage was an easy and effective method to increase foot traffic, connect with consumers, and educate them. A very few retail stores (7.50%) considered use of props as an important element of visual merchandising because they improve the appearance of the item and hence enhance sales. But all these visual merchandising elements helps in keeping the store image as these elements allure the customers and also strengthen the relationship between the customer and store.

Saricam *et al.* (2018) [12] in their study found that all the luxury brand retail stores used visual merchandising elements

in their store to increase the sales. Among all the visual merchandising elements, signage and window display were most preferred by the retailers. Because the window display is one of the most significant external displays as it was the first point at which the client decides whether to enter or not to the shop. Four new aspects were added: impact, image, theme, and composition. The signage facilitates customer mobility inside the shop and has the ability to immediately transmit messages about products, pricing, or promotions, by the use of electronic display and lettering. Sampaio *et al.* (2017) [11] discussed about the five visual merchandising practices that affect the consumer behaviour. According to the findings of statistical data research, three of the five visual merchandising aspects were essential in influencing customers' impulsive buying behaviour. Window display, mannequin display, and promotional signage were all positively connected and found as factors of efficient visual merchandising for impulsive purchases at a women's fashion specialty business.
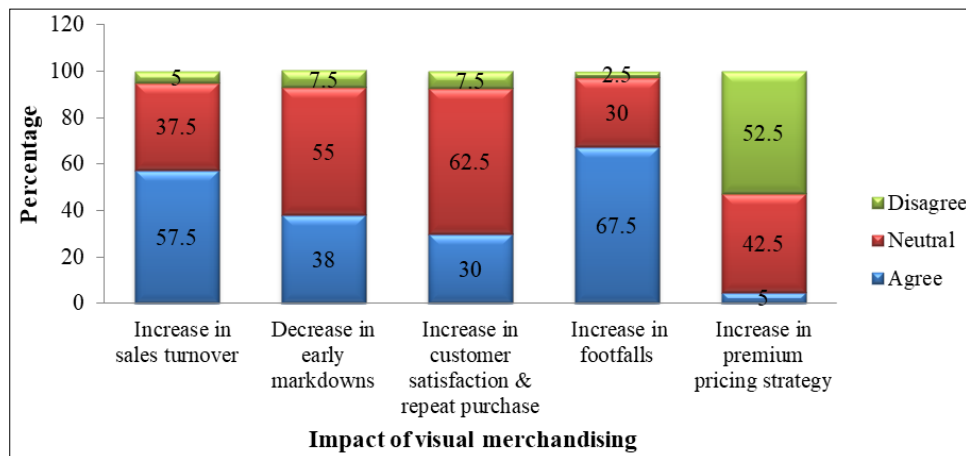
(n = 40)*
*Multiple response

Fig 3.9: Impact of visual merchandising activities of the retail stores.

Visual merchandising promotes retail business by establishing a strong customer relationship and appealing environment that maximises company development and profit by educating the consumer with the strategic positioning of a product that underlines and readily extends the brand image. Figure 3.9 reveals that visual merchandising activities have both negative and positive outcomes on the retail store. The majority of respondents believed that visual merchandising activities enhanced foot traffic to the store, which led to an increase in sales turnover at the retail business. Furthermore, it was shown that 38% of respondents believed that attractive merchandising reduces early markdowns, increases consumer satisfaction, and encourages repeat purchases.

Around 5 percent of retailers agreed to the point that visual merchandising helps in increasing premium pricing strategy. It was found that majority of retailers (62.5%) being neutral to the point that visual merchandising helps in increasing customer satisfaction & repeat purchase followed by decrease in early markdowns. Increase in sales turnover and increase in premium pricing were reported neutral by 37.5 and 42.5 percent of retailers respectively. It was observed that 52.5 percent of retailers disagreed on the point that visual merchandising activities helps in increasing premium pricing strategy followed by increasing customer satisfaction and decrease in early markdowns. A very few retailers disagreed on the point that visual merchandising helps in increasing sales turnover followed by increase in footfalls. They believe that VM is a quiet selling strategy that may assist to minimise staff mix, boost per square foot returns, and cut marketing costs. The majority of respondents stated that they can directly see the benefit of visual merchandising in terms of increased traffic, sales turnover, and shop image.

Verma *et al.* (2021) [16] stated that visual merchandising is all about generating a novelty in your business via some creative actions that will affect the behaviour of the individual going to the store to shop. Whether you own a small or large retail business, establishing an ambience and a nice mood for your customers is essential, and this can be accomplished via the creative imagination of the people who work in your store or you as an individual. Giving these personal touches and fairly affordable creative touches will do wonders for your sales numbers, and customers will love to buy in your business when they have a comfortable shopping experience. The best visual merchandising approach is one that increases both sales and profit and is closely related to consumer footfall and their experiences.

Niazi *et al.* (2015) [7] found that visual merchandising is the key to gaining a competitive edge over competitors in the market, and it assists companies in increasing sales, creating brand image, and attracting buyers to the items. As a result, companies should create long-term strategic plans to use visual merchandising at POS (Point of Sale). It assists the retailer in understanding the brand, increasing sales by directing customers to the goods, and teaching how the product should be divided and presented. Findings of many studies, also revealing that visual merchandising induces unexpected purchases by customers and plays a key influence in the customer's impulsive purchasing behaviour.

Conclusion
- Most of the store managers either themselves complete the work of visual merchandiser or their higher authority/owner gives them presentations according to which they plan and complete the work.
- Majority of respondents were aware about the benefits of visual merchandising activities. Also, they believe that visual merchandising aids in consumer attraction and with weighted mean score of 125.85 it stood first in ranking.
- Most of them were also aware about various inspiration sources and elements required for effective visual merchandising.

- Visual merchandising activities have both negative and positive outcomes on the retail store. The majority of respondents believed that visual merchandising activities enhanced foot traffic to the store, which led to an increase in sales turnover at the retail business. Furthermore, it was reported that 38% of respondents believed that attractive merchandising reduces early markdowns, increases consumer satisfaction, and encourages repeat purchases.
- The majority of respondents stated that VM is a quiet selling strategy that may assist to minimise staff mix, boost per square foot returns, and cut marketing costs.

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