

Visual Merchandising Practices used by Apparel Retail Stores

Khushpreet Kaur¹, Dr. Harminder Kaur Saini²

¹MSc Student, Department of Apparel and Textile Science,
College of Community Science, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, Punjab, India

²Professor, Department of Apparel and Textile Science,
College of Community Science, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

The present investigation was planned to study the visual merchandising practices of apparel retail stores in Ludhiana city. The survey regarding visual merchandising practices of apparel retail stores was conducted in four zones of Ludhiana. For the selection of apparel retail stores and customers, random sampling technique was used. Ten apparel retail stores from each zone (total 40) were selected randomly. An interview schedule was used for collecting data. Most of retail stores (82.5 %) have less than 5000 sq.ft area followed by 10 percent of retail stores who have area between 5000 to 10,000 sq.ft. Majority of the selected retail stores (93%) changed their window display after a week. It was reported that all the apparel retail stores used fixtures such as display racks and mannequins for displaying products followed by 92.50 and 47.50 percent of the stores which used grids and gondola shelves also, respectively. Around 55 percent of retail stores categorized their merchandise according to the size of product followed by 22.50 percent of the retailers, who assort their merchandise on colour basis. Arrangement of products in the store according to colour combination always attract the consumers.

KEYWORDS: Visual merchandising, Retailers, Consumer buying behaviour, Window display, Retail stores

1. INTRODUCTION

Visual merchandising is the main pillar of retail industry which generates more sales and influence the consumer behaviour and experience. Researchers proved that visual merchandising should be considered as vital part of marketing plan in support of sales increase and positive store image. As we know visual merchandising helps in maintaining the store image in consumer mind, so most of the brands give more importance to visual merchandising elements to differentiate themselves from competitors. Window displays and store entrance generally appeal the consumers and make them walk in. Visual merchandising influences the consumer's experience through effective pleasure and sensory aspects such as sound and environment. The planning of store and good visual merchandising shapes the consumer behaviour towards brand (Chakravarty 2018).

People will surely revisit the store if they found visual merchandising display interesting and memorable one which leads to impulsive buying. Visual merchandising is the presentation of merchandise at the right place, at the right time to influence the customers to make a purchase. The different techniques of display such as windows, promotional signage and merchandise affect the consumer's impulse buying behaviour (Mehta and Chugan 2015).

Today, many retailers follow the culture of visual merchandising to maintain the store and brand image. The aim of using effective graphics and visual arts is to increase the footfalls in the store and boost sales. In visual merchandising, a retailer should choose correct type of layout or other elements to increase sales because it has both the negative and positive effect on the store. Visual merchandising enhances the store beauty when we place the merchandise in a way that it seems attractive to the customers. Visual

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merchandising includes many core components which help in making store unique and attractive. Using the visual merchandising elements in the right way also helps in boosting sales (Bora 2020).

Visual merchandising elements are of two types i.e exterior and interior. Exterior elements include exterior signs, marquees, entrance, window displays and banners whereas interior elements include mannequins, colours, cleanliness, music, lightings, interior signs, space, floor layouts, creative display, video display and scents. All these factors play an important role in creating favourable store environment and increasing the sales figure (Wanniachchi and Kumara 2016).

The idea of having good visual merchandising elements in the store is prevailing very fast around the world. As we know visual merchandising is an art form of capturing the attention of customers. Elements of visual merchandising includes interior and exterior displays. The visual merchandising starts from the exterior of the retail store and ends at the interior of the store so, all these elements together make the good impact on customers (Bhasin 2020).

It is beyond doubt that consumers prioritize visual merchandising elements of the store that allure them and provides them with extraordinary offers in comparison with other stores or online shopping. Earlier people were not concerned about the visual merchandising elements but in the recent era, the storefront and window display are the main sources of attraction for customers and to boost up the sales. The overall aim of these visual merchandising elements is to provide the best shopping experience (Cant and Wiid 2020). Visual merchandising plays a crucial role in generating both product visibility and its sale ability in a retail environment. Absence of visual merchandising makes the product boring for the customers because no matter how good the product is, if that is not able to stand out from the competitor's product, people will not buy. Visual merchandising gives the detailed idea about the brand image when you enter the store (Ashesh 2019).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present examination was assumed to study role of visual merchandising practices in the various apparel retail stores which used visual merchandising elements to attract the customers. Keeping in mind the aims of the study, an appropriate methodology was adopted to conduct the study. The locale of the current study was Ludhiana city which was divided into four zones according to municipal corporation. An interview schedule was prepared and used to collect the data using survey method. A schedule

contained general information and other important factors that play a vital role in managing visual merchandising practices at the store. The information collected on the interview schedule was coded and tallied. The results were interpreted using percentages and weighted mean score.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Area of retail store

A retail trade area is the particular area from which a retailer attracts customers, as well as the distance to which a consumer is willing to travel. Consumer transaction records are available from marketing analytics businesses and other sources and retailers generally have good data to map out the trade area.

Table 1: Distribution of selected retail stores on the basis of their area (n=40)

Area (sq. ft)	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 5,000	33	82.50
5,000-10,000	4	10.00
More than 10,000	3	7.50

Data in Table 1 reveals that majority of retail stores (82.5%) had less than 5000 sq. ft area followed by 10 percent of retail stores who have area between 5000 to 10,000 sq.ft. Very few retail stores had more than 10,000 sq. ft area. Cavan (2016) states that all of the circumstances that lead retailers to the decision to close stores were unknown, the concept of scaled-down stores with limited retail selection appears threatened in this era of easy online ordering and shipping, as increasing numbers of small-town consumers access a full range of the latest merchandise from online sources. As small department shops tend to be especially vulnerable, retailer closure initiatives may had a higher proportional impact on smaller metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions. Store closures and trade area realignment are becoming more prevalent as a result of inadequate trade area population. Area of the store had to be comfortable and favourable for shopping that make customers to spend more time in the retail store.

3.2. Products sold by the retail stores

Product categorization is dividing products into different sub groups based on the selling and retailing. But the category should be defined in such a way that it represents the requirements of the customers rather than just the product's shape. Data in Table 2 indicates that all selected retail stores dealt in apparel and accessories followed by footwear. Majority of the retail stores (72.50%) sold the men's clothing followed by women's clothing which were sold by 37.50 percent of retailers.

Table 2: Types of products sold by the retail stores (n=40) *

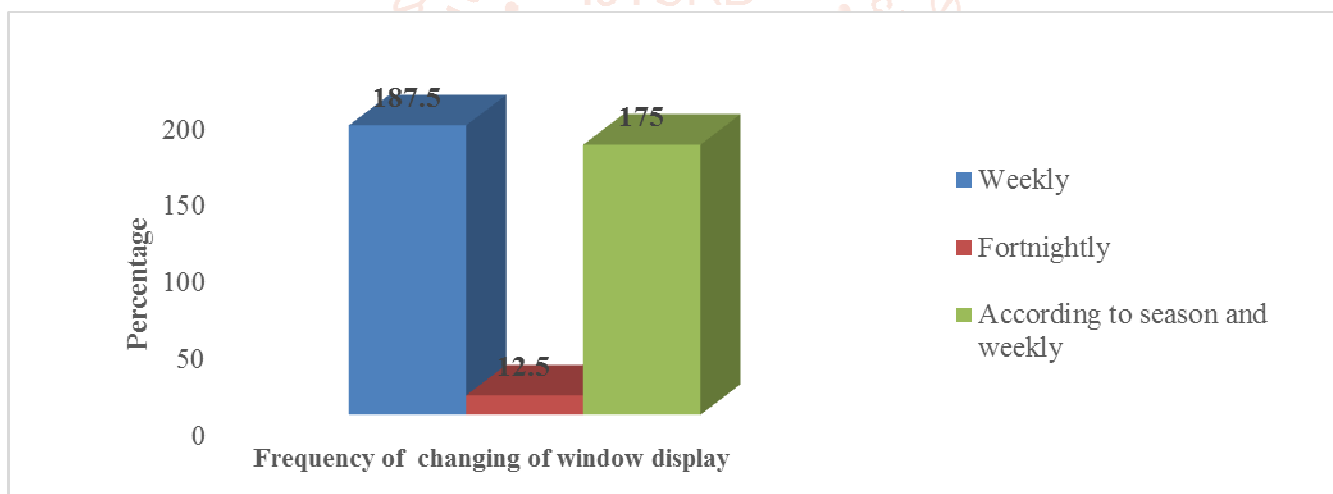
Product categories	Frequency	Percentage
Accessories	6	15.00
Foot wears	3	7.50
Kids wear clothing	7	17.50
Men's clothing	29	72.50
Women's clothing	15	37.50

*Multiple response

Around 17.5 percent of retail stores dealt in kids clothing followed by accessories (15%) and footwear (7.5%), respectively. It can be concluded that most of the store's deal with clothing products. 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. Gill

3.3. Window display

The creative skill of presenting shop items in a storefront window is known as window display. Window display is very important as far as drawing attention of passing by customers is concerned. Data in Fig 1 reveals that majority of the selected retail stores (93%) changed their window display after a week, keeping in mind the season also. It was also seen that few retail store namely H&M and Shopper's Stop changed their display fortnightly. Further, it was noticed that most of the retail stores changed their window display on weekly and seasonal basis. Gill (2019) also found similar results which revealed selected stores changed their window display after a week and very few changed their window display on seasonal basis.



Multiple response Fig. 1: Frequency of changing window display in selected retail stores (n=40)

Frequent changing of window display was done to attract more customers. Simultaneously, it was found that majority of retail stores planned the theme of window display according to season and festivals. Very few retail stores were of the opinion that they planned the theme of window display according to special events. Mohanraj and Gopalakrishnan (2020) also found similar results in their study where retailers used theme display to attract the customers to the store as the retailers know that customers get more attracted towards the theme displays at the store front. Madhavi and Leelavati (2013) stated that themes were required for all shop displays. They may be passionate, wild, or capricious but they have the ability to captivate people's imaginations. A nice theme will entice a consumer who is in the mood to shop. The themes were primarily determined by the retailer's ideas and ingenuity. The secret to a good window display is to focus on the correct subject rather than building a show using pricey raw materials. The primary objective of display is to highlight the items within the entire display space. Customers pay three to five seconds of attention to the window display.

3.4. Interior elements

Table 3 depicts the different layouts used by the selected retail stores. Store layout is the design of store's floor space and the placement of items within that store. Grids are preferred by all the stores as it gives lots of exposure to products because consumers move up and down the aisles. Majority of the stores preferred

(2019) also reported that majority of retail stores have apparel and accessories. The retail stores also deal in footwear section and there is equal percentage share of apparel and accessories. Retailers' product categories are essential to their identity and should be structured in accordance with the demands and behaviours of their target customers.

Cant and Hefer (2014) from their study found that apparel retail industry set a remarkable place in the gross domestic product of the country and it is an essential part in the retail industry. Apparel retail industry is always contributing to overall growth of retail industry. As competition becomes more intense and severe, it is critical that the garment business continue to seek new ways to stay innovative and develop new opportunities to expand.

racetrack and free-flow store layout which stood at 92.5 per cent and 95 per cent, respectively. Only 5 per cent of the retail stores preferred herringbone layout because of the long and narrow structure of the store and doesn't make it cluttered.

Table 3: Different interior elements used by the apparel retail stores (n=40)

Store layout	Frequency*	Percentage
Grid	40	100.00
Racetrack	37	92.50
Free-flow	38	95.00
Herringbone	2	5.00
Types of fixtures	Frequency*	Percentage
Display racks	40	100.00
Gondola shelves	19	47.50
Grids	37	92.50
Kiosk	5	12.50
Mannequins	40	100.00
Rounder	12	30.00
Basis of assortment	Frequency	Percentage
Colour	9	22.50
Price	3	7.50
Size	22	55.00
Style features	6	15.00

*Multiple response

Fixtures are any pieces of equipment or furniture that are used to showcase items. Fixtures are store decorations that are either permanent or moveable and are used to store and display the products. Data in Table 3 revealed that all the apparel retail stores used fixtures such as display racks and mannequins for displaying products followed by 92.50 and 47.50 percent of the stores, which used grids and gondola shelves respectively. The display provides favourable environment for shopping to the customers. Retailers were of the view point that consumer get attracted to the display of products on the mannequins and the new merchandise on the display racks. Hangers, also play important role in generating customer attention. Further, it was observed that few retail stores also i. e., 30 and 12.50% used rounder and kiosk for display respectively. The data revealed that no retail stores used point of purchase display as a fixture in the store. Merugu and Vaddadi (2017) also found that retailers used different types of fixtures like mannequins & display racks in their stores as they change the customer mood to shop and provide them comfortable environment for shopping.

Bhatia and Kholiya (2016) found that virtually all of the stores used displays with various tools and strategies to maintain their store atmosphere and to stimulate visitors to make a purchase choice. Swarnalatha and Soundhariya (2018) describes visual merchandising as a process of producing items that are appealing to customers. It was found that using the right fixtures to display the goods boosts sales per square feet. When a consumer selects items to purchase, knowledge is essential in assisting them in making their decision. A well-designed retail display will suffice.

Assortment planning includes evaluating specific product qualities such as style, colour, size, function, price, brand and stock keeping unit (SKU) performance during selection to suit the consumers' tastes and demands. Table 3 shows, that around 55 percent of retail stores categorized their merchandise according to the size of product followed by 22.50 percent of the retailers who assort their merchandise on colour basis. The data also revealed that very few retail stores (7.50%) categorized their merchandise according to price range of product. The findings of the Abad *et.al* (2019) also states that product presentation and assortment according to different styles catches consumer attention and increase impulse buying. Jegatheeswaran (2016) also found that product assortment and presentation have positive impact on the consumer and provide comfortable shopping environment.

3.5. Allocation of budget on visual merchandising

A budget is a financial plan for a certain term, usually a year which is known to significantly improve the performance of any financial project. Budget means the amount of money fixed for the particular work. Data in Figure 2 shows that around 37.50 percent of respondents stated that the budget for visual merchandising

activities must be decided by the store, i.e., no fixed amount for any given year. The retailer should determine the budget based on the kind of product, market scenario, client type, promotional aim, shop location, retail outlet space and so on.

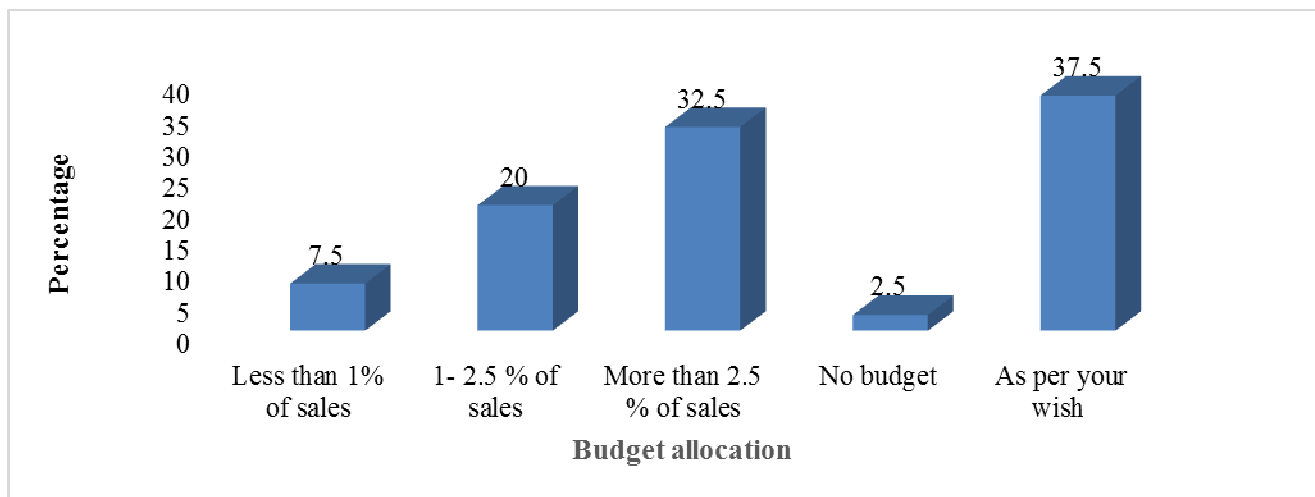


Fig. 2: Budget allocation to visual merchandising activities by the retail stores (n=40)

But some of the retailers were of the view that most of the times, budget allocation to these activities was done by the manager. These statements were given by those stores which appointed a store manager in the store. About 32.50 percent of respondents reported that the budget for the visual merchandising activities should be higher than 2.50 percent of sales. They don't mind having a little higher budget than other shops since they know that investing in this area will help them attract a big number of clients and hence increase sales. They further stated that merchants in industrialised nations spend a lot of money on visual merchandising whereas Indian retailers lag behind. Budget allocation of 1- 2.5 % of sales and less than 1% of sales for visual merchandising activities was reported by 20 and 7.50 percent of the retail stores, respectively. Only 2.50 percent of the stores reported no budget for visual merchandising activities which itself explains that they don't give any importance to visual merchandising activities in the retail sector.

Hubrechts and Kokturk (2012) reported that retailers state visual marketing innovation and utilisation should be limited by money. Retailers integrate merchandising in their business plans and budget for visual merchandising efforts based on market trends and profit margins. Kim (2011) found that the usage of a sales promotion budget would have a two-fold effect on financial performance: it is positively connected to sales volumes and adversely related to profitability, when the effects of the gross margin shift over time are taken into account. Retailers plan budget for the use of props, mannequins and fixtures too in the context to sales promotion.

3.6. Visual merchandising planning

Visual merchandising planning is a process of choosing, controlling, acquiring, presenting, and pricing items in a way that maximises returns on investment and adds value to the brand name by fulfilling customer demands. Furthermore, merchandising planning entails making the appropriate goods accessible at the right time, in the right place, in the right numbers and at the right price.

Table 4: Time taken for implementing visual merchandising strategy for the retail store (n=40)

Duration	Frequency	Percentage
Less than a week	8	20.00
A week	28	70.00
Any other	4	10.00

In Table 4, it was found that majority of the retailers (70%) took a week for the planning of visual merchandising strategy followed by the 20 percent of them who took less than week time for planning. In the above given Table, any other includes the minimum or maximum time taken for the planning of visual merchandising strategy. So, it was revealed that very few percentage of retailers (10%) done the work in 10 hours or in day. It was reported that no retail store took more than a week for the planning of visual merchandising strategy. Visual merchandising elements were mainly used to enhance the store appearance so that maximum of customers get attracted and visit the store. Retailers stated that planning of visual merchandising activities was done by the higher authorities they just execute the plan which will take a week.

Hemanth and Shankaralinga (2017) from their study found that visual merchandising allure the customers and generate more sales. Retailers should not waste their time because trends were changing very fast. So, it's important for them to remain up to date to allure the customers. Retailers take time to plan and execute the visual merchandising plan but they always try not to waste more time in visual merchandising activities. Retailers also use the empty space with the help of visual merchandising elements to showcase wide variety of garments to the customer. As the retail industry was growing fast, so retailers now a days, giving more attention to visual merchandising activities.

3.7. Challenges faced by retailers

Customers have more and more choices and high expectations in the retail experience. But merchandising has its own set of problems and it is not an easy accomplishment to balance space, time and cash with the pressures to increase your game. Each brand has its own unique difficulties, yet many have common barriers. Though we know every retailer faces the challenges while planning the visual merchandising activities.

So, Table 5 explains the challenges faced by the visual merchandiser during planning the visual merchandising activities. It was observed that majority of respondents (65%) face the problem of limited display space followed by the problem of limited budget (50 %). Around 45 percent of respondents faced the problem of less time as they were of the view point authorities set the time for them to adopt visual merchandising practices in the retail store. Social ethics and political constraints were also a problem which have been faced by 17.5 percent of respondents. Social ethics is a set of norms or standards that society follows, based on ethical decisions and ideals. A form of external restriction operating on a business is political considerations in the context of the external environment in which it operates. They are associated with government activities and political situations in the location where the firm operates or aspires to operate.

Table 5: Challenges faced by retailers during planning of visual merchandising activities for the retail store (n=40)

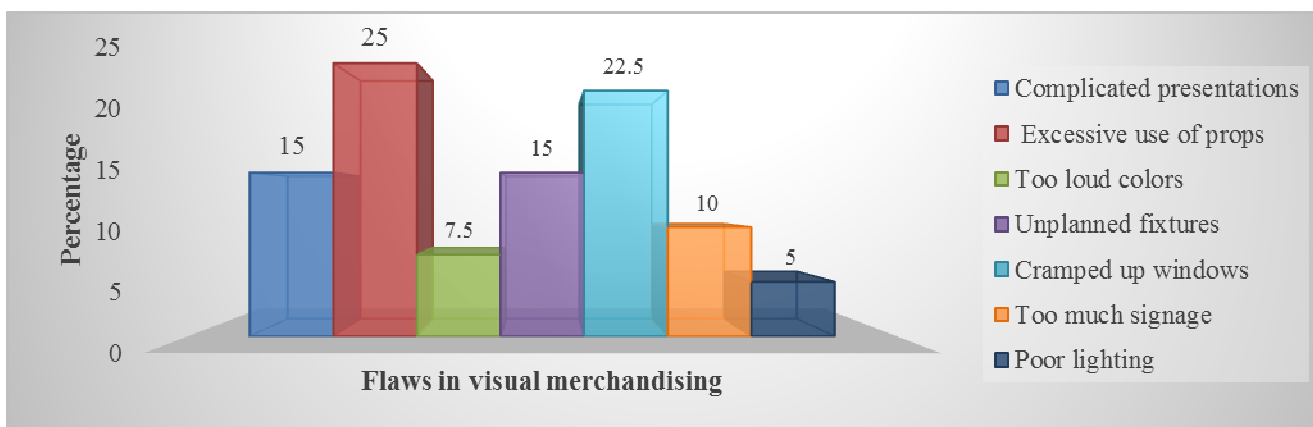
Challenges	Frequency*	Percentage
Limited display space	26	65.00
Limited budget	20	50.00
Competitor's strategy	5	10.00
Less time	18	45.00
Social ethics & political constraints	7	17.5

*Multiple response

Very few retailers (10 %) faced the problem of competitors strategy. A competitive strategy is a long-term action developed by a firm to obtain a competitive edge over its competitors after analysing their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the industry and comparing them to your own. Hemanth and Shankaralinga (2017) also found the same that it was difficult for shops to use visual merchandising elements for brand image since they are all focused on making income rather than establishing and building image. It was found that store should have focus point which attracts the attention of customer and increase footfalls to the store. Retailers found difficulty while planning visual merchandising activities due to less time because fashion trends were changing so fast and to remain in the retail market they have to be up to date.

3.8. Common flaws in visual merchandising activities

Most companies use merchandising plans in stores to create guidelines and achieve certain goals. Unfortunately, the store's conditions are not always what you would expect, which may compromise your merchandising plans. Disadvantages can be detected in a variety of ways, ranging from a lack of signage to faulty displays. Merchandising and retail issues like these can result in significant revenue losses for many large distributors (both regional and national) due to decreased consumer satisfaction and an abused brand image. Every retailer has certain faults in their visual merchandising efforts that reduce shop sales. According to the data in Figure 3, 25 percent of respondents indicated that excessive usage of props was a typical problem observed in Indian retail shops. They generally believe that props were not used correctly, and that there has to be a deeper knowledge of the use of props as a selling tool and that they must be used imaginatively. Further, it was noticed that cramped up windows also seen as flaw by 22.5 percent of respondents. Around 15 percent of respondents seen a complicated presentations and unplanned fixtures as flaw in the activities of others. Less than 10 percent of respondents seen uses of too much signage, too loud colours and poor lighting as a common flaw in the activities of others. The retailers also get the insight from the activities of others which they use in their stores as creative visual merchandising activities.



***Multiple response Fig. 3: Common flaws found in the visual merchandising activities of retailers (n=40)**

Calingo (2018) states "Complex presentations" were found to be the most prevalent error committed by visual merchandisers in Metro Manila retail locations, followed by "cramped up windows". In terms of human talent, the results revealed a substantial difference in the true evaluation of management skills when categorized by years of experience in visual merchandising. Mishra and Mishra (2015) reveal that store layout or display should be appealing and varied display tactics can be done and re-done to minimise consumer complaints and monotony, however more changes irritate customers and less changes make customers acclimated and boring them. So, to break the monotony and give the business a fresh appearance, a product layout may be done again as needed by the store. The reasons can be anything from a better look, top selling products, or any modifications needed.

3.9. Obtaining Respondents Feedback

The data obtained from customer input is depicted in Figure 4. It was revealed that the majority of retail stores used various methods to obtain feedback from their customers about visual marketing initiatives.

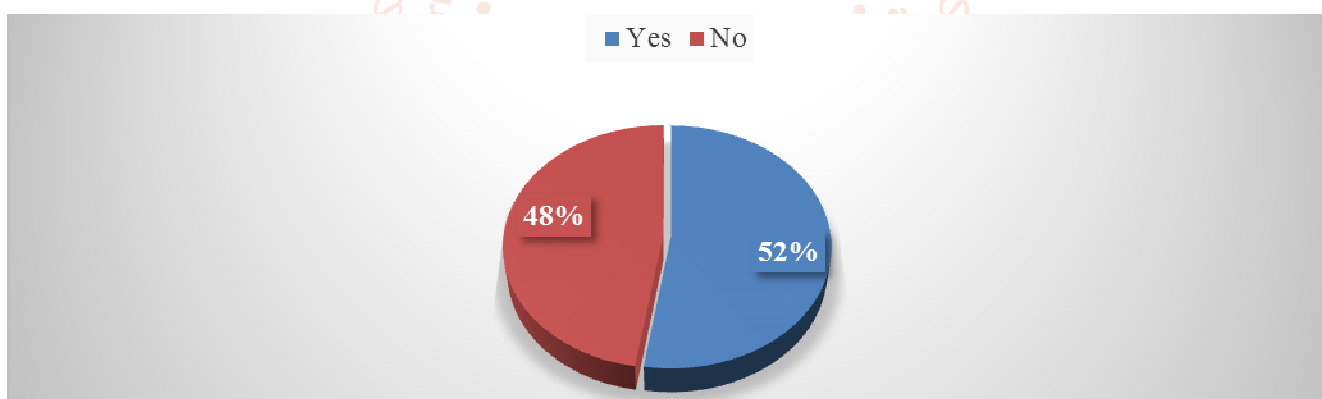


Fig. 4: Obtaining Customers feedback regarding effectiveness of visual merchandising (n=40)

Furthermore, it was shown that 48 percent of retail outlets do not ask customers for feedback on their visual merchandising efforts. Consumer feedback on visual merchandising activities has been found to help them in the following ways: they learn about their customers' likes and preferences, and they acquire more original suggestions for visual merchandising activities from their customers.

CONCLUSION

It was found that theme displays, window display, store layout and atmosphere were main elements of visual merchandising affecting the sales of the retail store. It was revealed that people were more aware about the store type, visual merchandising elements, products to be purchased along with the price range, quality and other factors. As the budget allocation was done by higher authorities of the company, it was found that retailers want that allocation of budget should be in their hands as they know the market more or they were part of them. It was revealed that

excessive use of props and cramped up windows were the common flaws found in the activities of retailers. Retailers were aware about the benefits of employing visual merchandising in the store but they faced many challenges while implementing visual merchandising in the store. Less time, limited display space and limited budget found out be main challenges faced by retailers. It was found out that window display plays important role in generating sales and most of the retailers change window displays weekly in order to remain in trends and increasing footfalls.

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