

## **Right Product at The Right Place: Analysis of the Changing Job Responsibilities of Visual Merchandisers During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

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Keywords: Visual Merchandising, Retail Management, Covid-19, Job Responsibility

The Indian retail industry consists of more than 15 million retailers, comprising micro, small and large enterprises and divided into unorganized micro-businesses and organized retail chains (Sharma & Jhamb, 2020). The organized sector further includes big-box retailers and multinational online shopping sites. The retail industry employs between 40 and 50 million people and contributes 10 percent to the country's GDP (Goswami & Chouhan, 2021). Despite the boom in the e-commerce sector in India, the unorganized retail sector met the needs of the majority of the country's population. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced consumers to change the way they prefer to shop (Swazan, Basak & Das, 2022).

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic created an unprecedented shock to the Indian economy and in turn to the retail industry. With the prolonged country-wide lockdowns, economic downturn, and associated disruption of demand and supply chains, the retail industry faced unparalleled challenges (Dabade, 2020). These challenges led to an increased shift in consumer buying behavior from traditional shopping to online shopping (Habib & Hamadneh, 2021). To bring back customers to in person shopping, business owners gave added responsibilities to the visual merchandisers to make the in-person shopping experience safe and enjoyable, as visual merchandising is a vital part of any retail operation. Visual merchandising enhances the attractiveness of a store and its perceived image from the customer's viewpoint (Bide, 2018).

Visual merchandising can be defined as everything the customer sees, both exterior and interior, that creates a positive image of a business and results in attention, interest, desire, and action on the part of the customer (Bide, 2018). The ultimate objective of visual merchandising is to add value to retail stores and to make the customer's experience easier and better in order to motivate them to purchase more products from the store. Visual merchandising is one of the in-store marketing tools that triggers unplanned buying among consumers (Agdayemawer & Kumar, 2019).

The job characteristics theory by Hackman and Oldham (1975) posits that job characteristics are the systems or situational factors affecting the psychological and attitudinal condition of

employees. The theory also states that enriched and motivating job design should allow employees to have the opportunity to use different skills and talents to perform tasks, associate or identify themselves closely with the task completed, feel empowered in performing the job through autonomy obtained from the job and get adequate feedback from the job done (Johari & Yahya, 2016). The job characteristics theory forms the theoretical foundation for this study.

The aim of this study was to investigate the changes in the visual merchandising job characteristics, specifically (a) to explore the impact Covid-19 pandemic had on the visual merchandising job responsibilities and (b) to identify which job features were most prevalent for sustaining through Covid-19. To achieve the objectives, a qualitative interview approach was taken to understand the changing job space of visual merchandisers (Swazan & Das, 2022). Six participants, between the ages of 30 and 40, were purposively chosen as each had more than two years working experience as visual merchandisers for big box Indian retail chains. Data were collected through 30-minute semi-structured open-ended interviews via teleconferencing in March 2022. Data collection was framed by job characteristics theory. Unique themes were generated and interpreted.

The results of this study revealed several impacts on job responsibilities along with some added responsibilities due to the covid-19 pandemic. These are (1) Right product at the right place (6 out of 6) described as “masks, sanitization products, and seasonal goods needed to be placed on the front of the store so that customers can see it right away after entering”; (2) Providing customer safety (5 out of 6) described as “we had to make the floor planning in a way that there will be no crowd in front of any single shelf”; (3) Maintain government instructions (5 out of 6) described as “we had to strictly follow the government orders of maintaining six feet distance between customers and a limited number of customers at a time inside the store”; (4) Extra effort on aesthetics (4 out of 6) described as “during the pandemic customers were shopping online so the only few customers that are coming to the store we had to make sure that they get a nice view of the store”; (5) New product advertising (3 out of 6) described as “because of the low number of customers we had to advertise the new products in an effective way so that customers can see and know about the product without touching it like hanging posters, digital screen etc.”

The most important job skills that helped the visual merchandisers for sustaining through Covid-19 were found to be: (1) Software skill (5 out of 6) described as “to attract customers back to store we had to learn several software on floor mapping, designing, photoshop, and coding”; (2) Improved communication skill (4 out of 6) described as “we had to improve our communication skill so that we can better interact with customers”; (3) Individual development (4 out of 6)

described as “we had to work on time management, interpersonal skill, and leadership skill to develop ourselves during this pandemic.”

The study result has some major implications and contributions. The study provides new evidence on the added job responsibilities of the visual merchandisers during the covid-19 pandemic and also revealed some of the major skills that helped the visual merchandiser in this tough business environment. Customer safety was found to be one of the major responsibilities in the visual merchandising job category as the main purpose of this job category is to bring the customers back to the store in this post-pandemic situation. The visual merchandisers also had to improvise their technological skills as well as interpersonal skills during the pandemic to make the business successful. The study findings may help existing and future visual merchandisers to know more about the added responsibilities in their job due to covid-19. Future research is recommended to use quantitative methods such as surveys to identify the relationship between visual merchandiser’s skill sets and business sales.

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