

# Ensuring Customer Safety: An In-Depth Study of Covid-19 Precautions in Major Indian Retail Stores and Their Impact on Shopping Experience

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## Abstract

Customer safety and precautionary measures are essential for retail stores during the COVID-19 situation. There is a bigger challenge in front of the retail stores to offer the best of quality products with maximum service experience and minimum service disruptions. This study will list out various safety and security measures adopted by governments, customers, and organized retailing companies to secure them from COVID-19 pandemic. A research survey was conducted three retail stores which are very prominent in India to know the various ways to contain the virus and its impact on the customer experience. The study uses moderate participant observation method and interviewing method to ascertain the data from the customers and retail companies.

**Key words:** COVID-19; disease, public health; retail store; safety measures; social distance; precautions; delivery; information

## Introduction

Novel Corona virus disease (SARS n-Cov/ COVID-19) has been declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. The Corona virus is a highly contagious and life-threatening disease spread in 208 countries and has been initially traced in Wuhan City of China in Mid November 2019 and it has started spreading into several countries by January 2020[1]. Regarding the incidence of COVID-19 and Monkeypox, we have released a number of current and informative publications [2-11]. Many countries started responding to the pandemic by imposing strict measures starting from thermal screening in airports for incoming passengers, closure of airports for restricting the movement of people between countries, stalling the public transport and finally declaring full lockdown in countries.

India proactively reacted to the pandemic situation soon after recording its first COVID-19 positive case. Initially, international movements were regulated and the state governments immediately after declaring lockdown in their respective states. Later, to bring a uniform effort across the nation, finally, the central government announced lockdown of the

entire nation. However, to have effective lockdown results, and to maintain social distancing, it is highly essential to confine people to their homes, whereas it has become a challenging task to regulate authorities. As a matter of fact, the Indian population frequently visits marketplaces for grocery purchases to fulfill their daily food needs. Therefore, the government permitted them to operate these retail malls to grocery, vegetable, and meat markets within the permissible time limits. The Indian grocery markets operate in traditional and modern retail formats. Hence, both are functioning to meet the daily needs of customers during the lockdown.

In this abnormal situation, the retail markets are functioning to meet the needs of the public. The challenges for firms are that, while fulfilling the needs of the customers, the well-being of customers and employees' safety are top priorities for retail firms [12]. Keeping this complex situation in mind, the retail firms imposed strict measures which are prescribed by public health and safety authorities to contain the spread of

COVID-19. In addition, few voluntary measures were also implemented in the retail stores [13].

## 2.0 Problem:

In today's environment, the safety is one of the major offerings to the customer in addition to the goods or service offering in the market which is priceless, and any deviation of this will pose a potential danger to the health and life of customer [14]. The Oxford dictionary defined Safety as *'the condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury'* and Customer as *'the person who buys goods or services from a shop or businesses'*. Customer perceived safety will have a greater degree of impact on the customer satisfaction [15]. The retail enterprises are public centric and attract huge traffic due to sudden spurt of demand which causes a major risk of COVID-19 [15], therefore Customer safety in the COVID-19 pandemic context elaborated as when a customer visits the market places to purchase required goods and services. If any customer enters into the retailer's premises until they leave, have to be well safeguarded through preventive measures as they are considered to be a potential customer. These measures will be disrupting normal consumer experience and causes anxiety and fear in customer [16]. In the event of adverse consequence due to the health challenges, the legal remedies are denied. The damages or remedies are provided to consumers only under the Consumer Protection laws only when the customer engages in exchange for value for money for agreed terms and conditions. A customer can lodge a complaint to the competent consumer forum when *'services which are hazardous or likely to be hazardous to life and safety of the public when used, are being offered by the service provider which such person could have known with due diligence to be injurious to life and safety'*. Hence Consumer safety is applying within the contours of adverse utilities of goods and services, whereas Customer safety is associated with remedial measures [17]. The physical retail sales are increased by 70% during the pandemic to meet the pandemic eventualities [18].

However, if the customer does not engage in buying activity, there will still be ethical and moral responsibility that lies on the part of the firm to provide safety to the customer till he/she leaves their premises. Hence, it is a legal and moral compulsion on the part of firms to impose appropriate measures to prevent the customer from the exposure of harmful viruses and restrict them from grave public health concerns.

## 3.0 Rationale of study:

Ensuring customer safety has become an overarching priority in the marketing landscape, particularly amid the challenging backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The significance of safeguarding customers' well-being is not only a legal and governmental compliance but also a moral and marketing ethical responsibility that extends throughout the entire consumer journey. In adherence to established customer protection laws, the commitment to ensuring customer safety initiates from the moment a product is purchased and extends through the possession of goods and the delivery of services. However, in the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the obligation to prioritize customer safety transcends the conventional boundaries and necessitates a comprehensive approach that commences right from the commencement of the shopping experience.

As customers enter the premises of retail stores, a heightened ethical responsibility unfolds for ensuring their safety, given the unique challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic. It becomes imperative for retail establishments to proactively implement and enforce robust customer safety measures to mitigate the risks associated with the spread of the COVID-19 disease. The onus lies on retailers to create an

environment that not only meets regulatory standards but also goes above and beyond to prioritize the health and life of every customer. By meticulously observing and adhering to these safety measures, retail establishments contribute to the collective effort of containing the spread of the virus, thereby fostering a safer and healthier community.

In response to the evolving situation of COVID-19 in the country, a detailed observational study has been conducted in the field of retailing. This study sheds light on the diverse array of measures initiated by modern retail firms to address the challenges posed by the pandemic. From stringent hygiene protocols to innovative social distancing measures, the study underscores the adaptability and resilience of retail establishments in their pursuit of ensuring customer safety. As retail firms navigate the complexities of the current environment, their commitment to prioritizing customer safety emerges as a crucial factor not only in compliance with regulations but also as a testament to their dedication to the well-being of the larger community.

## 4.0 Objectives of the study:

The study sets out with a primary objective rooted in the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, recognizing a conspicuous absence of on-hand resources in existing literature pertaining to the containment of viruses in public spaces, with a specific focus on retail stores and food markets. Given the inevitability of people frequenting these establishments, the imperative emerges to contribute to the development of literature tailored for situations akin to the COVID-19 pandemic and to distill readily available best practices for operating retail stores in the complex landscape of pandemics. The overarching objective of this study is, therefore, to formulate comprehensive safety measures specifically tailored for the containment of viruses within the unique context of retail stores.

In furtherance of the principal objective, the study delineates specific supporting objectives, which serve as crucial milestones towards achieving the broader aim:

1. **Identification of Self-Precautionary and Safety Measures:** The first supporting objective focuses on the identification of various customer self-precautionary measures and safety protocols recommended by diverse governmental and public health authorities. By synthesizing this information, the study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the measures advocated for containing the spread of viruses within the confines of retail stores. This step is pivotal in laying the groundwork for the formulation of effective safety guidelines.
2. **Analysis of Safety Measures in Retail Outlets:** The second supporting objective involves a meticulous analysis of the safety measures currently being implemented in selected retail outlets. This includes a scrutiny of the measures mandated by regulatory bodies as well as any additional voluntary measures adopted by these outlets during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the practical implementations on the ground, the study seeks to provide insights into the effectiveness and adaptability of different safety measures in real-world retail settings.
3. **Impact on Customer Shopping Experience:** The third supporting objective delves into the qualitative aspect of the study, aiming to understand the effect of customer safety measures on the overall shopping experience. This involves an exploration of how the implemented safety protocols influence customer perceptions, satisfaction, and behavior within the retail environment. By gauging the impact on the customer experience, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform the formulation of customer-centric safety measures.

In essence, these supporting objectives form a structured framework for the study, enabling a holistic exploration of safety measures in retail stores amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a synthesis of regulatory guidelines, practical implementations, and customer experiences, the study endeavors to contribute not only to the immediate needs of the current pandemic but also to the establishment of a foundation for future reference in managing similar complex situations.

### 5.0 Methodology:

This study adopts a hybrid research approach, primarily characterized by a qualitative orientation. The majority of the data gathered and analyzed in this study is qualitative, emphasizing the exploration and interpretation of nuanced aspects, meanings, and contextual intricacies. Qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observations have been employed to capture the richness of experiences and perspectives within the research context. However, recognizing the benefits of a mixed-methods approach, a substantial portion of the data has also been collected for quantitative purposes. This quantitative component complements the qualitative findings by providing numerical data, allowing for statistical analysis, and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative data enhances the robustness and depth of the study, providing a well-rounded perspective that captures the complexities of the subject under investigation.

This study is conducted in the Telangana state of India, which is identified as Red Zone by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare by the Government of India. In this state, the public health authorities are actively engaged in containing the spread of COVID-19 disease and thereby lockdown measures are enforced strictly in containment zones [19]. This study is conducted in three well-established modern retail formats operating India namely Reliance (R), More (M) and Heritage (H) located in Nizamabad, Warangal, and Hyderabad cities of Telangana state and offers wide variety of assortments and categories of goods. These selected retail stores are located in close vicinity of urban population and attract large foot falling. The pilot interviews are conducted to identify the attributes of study.

The data is collected by using the Moderate Participant Observation method to check whether the safety precautionary measures being implemented in-toto and also by interviewing customers and executives of the stores with structured questionnaire and schedule respectively.

*Participant observation is a qualitative data collection methodology that provides rich descriptive information on human behaviors and experiences in a particular context. This approach enables a researcher to participate in a social group and observe people as well as the environment. In doing so, the researcher develops a holistic understanding of how people make sense of their experiences and what is occurring around them [20].*

A set of customer safety measures are recommended by the governmental authorities, have to be followed in all small retail stores to large formats. Hence the stores executives are asked to respond whether they are implementing such COVID-19 containment measures in their stores in total. In addition to the mandatory measures, the executives are asked to respond whether there are any voluntary measures are being initiated for the containment of the virus. This study adopted judgmental sampling method to meet the objectives of the study in the complex pandemic environment. Survey is conducted in six retail stores in three cities and 180 customers were administered the questionnaires and 30 executives were interviewed with interview schedule. The data is also collected by electronic means by using Google forms, telephonic interview and also personal meetings with customers and executives. The structured questionnaires are used to measure the customer opinion on the various safety precautionary measures adopted in the retail stores and their

acceptability is gauged on Likert's scale on various attributes. The study is conducted in limited locations with limited sample; therefore, the study outcomes are subjected to limitation of sample adequacy and homogeneity of samples.

### 6.0 Results & Discussion:

The study has identified that the governments has taken wide range of preventive measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 virus. The Trace, Test and Treat (3T) formula was the guiding principle for the healthcare providers [21]. As per the government directions, wearing of masks and gloves are compulsory in public places. People are not allowed to drink, smoke and spit in the public places, the violators are penalized heavily. The large sized retail stores are not permitted to operate for long hours to avoid crowd and virus transmission. The meat markets are used to operate only on Sundays to avoid crowd to expose to virus. But the customers are appearing like welcoming preventive measure of entry restrictions.

*Wearing gloves and masks:* The study revealed that the staff working at Reliance, More and Heritage are well covering themselves with masks and gloves the Mean score reflects the positivity from customers and executives. They used to sanitize themselves frequently to remain as non-transmitter of a virus. Reliance mandated that customers who come to shop shall use the mask. This was a rigid condition during the first wave of COVID-19. As sufficient N95 masks are not available in the market, most of the customers used to cover their faces with stitched cloth masks; or cover with handkerchiefs. The N95 masks, which were only available to fewer people due to shortage of supply, were even surgical masks also not sufficiently available during the first wave due to a sudden spike in demand. In the initial days of Pandemic, N95 masks are expensive. However, we may notice N95 mask is becoming more widely available on the market in the second and third waves due to the increase in production, so consumers are mostly used N95 mask in the second and third waves

*Sanitization:* Before any customer enters into shopping area at Reliance, More and Heritage stores, they must get through the stringent entry restrictions at the main entrance during the COVID pandemic period. Customers need to sanitizer their hands and undergo thermal screening at the entry point. Consumers are not allowed to shop if their body temperature is above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Such cases will have to leave the premises immediately from the store's entrance. Thermal screening and hands sanitizing are essentially followed in all Reliance, More and Heritage supermarkets.

*Safety instructions:* Security personnel at the entrance of stores constantly instruct the customers to wear masks and to maintain social distance at least a minimum of one square metre throughout their shopping, if any customers attempt to enter inside shopping area without mask, the staffs ask them to leave the premises.

*Physical distance:* Physical distance is always been a top priority in the Reliance market. Any customer enters the Reliance market; the staff available will also appropriately instruct the customer to maintain the study identified there are stringent entry restriction are imposed in retail outlets to contain the spread of Corona virus. More Retail stores are managed in small built-up areas compare to other two stores, due to this some customers constantly waiting in front of the retail store, they used to allow a small number of customers inside at a time to maintain physical distance inside the store. Meanwhile the other customers are asked to stand in queue lines, where circles with a radius of half a meter were drawn to stand-in by customers practicing social distance till their turn comes to permit inside the store. The approximately one-meter social distance is the common norm practiced every retail store. If large number of customers enters into the supermarket at a time, the social distance will be reduced and the virus can be transmitted easily from one person to another.

Sl. No	Safety precaution	Reliance (R) Mean	More (M) Mean	Heritage (H) Mean	Weighted mean
	I have experienced/ noticed/ observed that the...				
1	Queuing with ensuing <i>physical distance</i> in retail premises	4.23	4.16	4.43	4.27
2	Staff and customers wearing <i>gloves and masks</i> in store	4.54	4.38	4.27	4.40
3	<i>Sanitization</i> is mandatory for staff and customers before entry into stores	3.90	4.15	4.33	4.13
4	<i>customers' safety related information is sent through messages and emails by retailers</i>	3.13	3.75	3.42	3.43
5	Retailers' websites requesting COVID-19 appropriate behavior from customers	3.14	3.82	3.55	3.50
6	Retailers' permit <i>limited time for in-store shopping</i> to reduce probability of virus transmission	4.34	4.14	3.86	4.11
7	Retailers' staff facilitated ease of shopping and checkout in a short span	3.82	3.98	3.18	3.66
8	<i>Shopping in groups not permitted</i>	4.61	4.22	4.32	4.38
9	Encouraging cashless methods of payments by Retailers	4.54	4.13	4.23	4.30
10	<i>Sanitization of retail stores</i> such as frequent mopping and cleaning of staircases, lifts, door handles, glasses, stairs railing, Sanitizing Freezers, Chillers, Cart handles, Swiping machines, checkout counters, tables, etc	4.75	4.24	4.62	4.54
11	The retailers encourage to Order through website on COD basis and home delivery to avoid physical contact	1.52	1.28	1.39	1.40
12	The retailers encourage to Order through WhatsApp and SMS to loyal customers on COD basis and home delivery through own logistics to avoid physical contact.	1.31	1.02	1.12	1.15
13	The retailers encourage shopping by emails, SMS to avoid visiting branches for retail services to avoid physical contact	3.52	3.13	3.01	3.22
14	The retailers suspended Cash on Delivery, Pay on delivery methods during pandemic waves.	3.22	3.53	3.34	3.36

### Safety measures in Retail outlets:

**Allowing limited customer for shopping:** Normally, the number of customers to be permitted inside the shopping floor at a time is determined by retail store managers. Once customers finish their shopping, the queue line waiting customers will be permitted to shopping. Once customers leave the store, the same number of new customers would be entering into the store, thus under no circumstances the customer foot fall would not go beyond the number determined. However, in some cases, customers are habitual to consume more time for shopping; such cases the support staff used to ask them to conclude their shopping quickly. Sometimes customers used to confront the staff.

**Shopping in groups not permitted:** It is observed retailers never used to permit customers who have habit of doing shopping with group of people who happens to be their family members or friends, in such situation the customers used to vehement with the security staff and had to postpone their shopping and to return without completing shopping. Usually, customers would bring their family members or friends along with them when they come shopping. All their sample retail malls have not allowed senior citizens over 60 years and children less than 15 years. Women were not allowed for shopping with their children. The risk of COVID-19 is high in these age groups. During the first wave of COVID-19, the retail stores marketed exclusively grocery items, whereas other shopping assortments are open for sale in the second and third waves.

**Reduction of retail operation timings:** The decisions relating to timings of public places and market operations are taken by state authorities upon the recommendations of government agencies and medical experts. The decisions were implemented uniformly across the state by the administration and strictly enforced by the police authorities meticulously. The Reliance, More and Heritage retail stores used to be

operational in limited hours during the first wave of COVID-19. In the pandemic spiking phase, retailers use to function from 6 am to 10 am for daily essential groceries. During the Pandemic wave flattening and decline phases, the timings are increased to 12 noon, later up to 6 pm and finally to 11 pm. Despite the gradual increase in the market operation timings, the government made the wearing of the masks and physical distance a compulsory need in public places, non-adhering to this would be treated as indiscipline and imposed penalties accordingly.

India has a distinct shopping practice that customers used visits markets once in a week in town/cities to buy large quantities of essential commodities sufficient for a week, therefore customer used to turn-up large in number to visit retail stores, thus the market is prone to the virus transmission of being overcrowded. While in COVID-19's first wave, the market used to operate in limited hours 6 am to 10 pm. Therefore, a large number of customers used to congregate at a single place and make purchases, which can trigger bottlenecks and expose customers to the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, the local governmental authorities set up small-sized weekly markets in local streets on Sundays and Wednesdays, so that they can purchase necessary vegetables at the nearest place. so that they would not have to go to the distant markets unnecessarily. The vegetable prices used to be regulated by government marketing authorities without exploiting the consumers with higher prices. The local bodies or the municipal employees monitor the prices. The customers used to buy vegetables at nearby vegetable shops instead of going to supermarkets like Reliance and More or weekly markets.

**Customers' safety related information:** More and Reliance Supermarket used to communicate customers' safety information directly through WhatsApp and SMS from time to time from their CRM database. Face masks and signboards were carried so that companies could share some



of the information with customers for the care of consumers, thus enabling some COVID-19 preventive information is kept in the corporate websites. Reliance and more used to display COVID-19 appropriate behavior display on their website. Most of the followers follow the behavior of the customers when they visit their store.

*Digital payments:* Once customers enter into retail stores, the staff will ensure to complete shopping by customers as soon as possible and makes them to proceed for check-out process. The sales staff assists the customer to find their required supplies to make the customer to shortest possible time so that the next batch of customers to check-in is completed. At the billing, all counters used to be fully functional for a faster billing process. During the pandemic, the digital payments are preferred over currency payments. The currency is also virus carrier; hence customers try to avoid currency notes to reduce the risk of virus transmission. The important paradigm shift is notice during the pandemic that ever since the digital payment system was introduced in India, the digital payments transactions reached a peak level during COVID-19. Digital payments have been increased manifolds. Every customer with a bank account and phone number liked is preferred to do transact with UPI. Mobile wallets, internet banking, credit cards, and other electronic payment instruments are considered a new phenomenon in the digital age of India.

*Sanitization of retail stores:* Maintaining the hygienic and sanitation is a hugely challenging task to Reliance, More and Heritage stores would be extremely complicated due to the constant influx of customers. Stores regularly engage staff to clean elevators, door handles, glass, and staircase

railings with Sanitation liquid from the store opening to store closing. Freezers, chillers, and shopping carts are also cleaned with disinfectants regularly, as well as swiping machines that clean computer checkout continuously. For the convenience of customers, companies like Reliance & More take orders through the website and WhatsApp number and deliver the goods to customers on cash-on-delivery method, which not only protects the customer from the COVID-19 virus but also makes them happier by serving in less time.

### 6.1 Effect of Covid-19 measures on customers' experience:

During the lockdown period, the customers are gripped in the fear of the COVID-19 virus. The customers used to perceive everything suspicious of COVID-19 and hence they are used to go for shopping in a compulsion situation to provide necessary goods for their homes. The governments and media created massive awareness programs about COVID-19, in addition, retail outlets cautious behavior used to make customers fear COVID-19. The customers used to experience a lot of inconvenience at the retail malls. Sometimes the waiting could go up to 30 min to 45 min to enter merely into stores. During the summer, the customers used to wait in front of malls. Customers are asked to complete their shopping so early to avoid virus transmission. The customers used to wait in long queues therefore they used to exhibit intolerance and aggression on the security and inside staff. However, the staff used restraint from customer aggression as they have a complete understanding of the prevailing conditions and was instructed accordingly by their higher ups.

Sl. No	Effect of Covid-19 measures on customers' experience	Reliance	More	Heritage	Weighted Mean
1	Suspicious and fearful environment, inconvenient of wearing masks	3.85	4.12	4.29	4.09
2	Long waiting queues in front of shops	4.11	4.61	3.94	4.22
3	Intolerance of customers towards the staff	3.64	3.89	3.11	3.55
4	Restricted shopping timings results in incomplete shopping	3.65	3.45	3.53	3.54
5	Poor customer service due to pull-based demand	3.90	3.45	3.70	3.68
6	Un-availability of shopping facility in emergency times	4.75	4.80	4.90	4.82
7	Experiencing stock-outs	4.21	4.11	3.93	4.08
8	Sanitizing goods due to suspicion of virus contamination	3.56	3.21	3.49	3.42

As the times of retail stores are shrunk by government authorities, the customers are forced to reduce their shopping time, the customers are focused on the complete their shopping within a short span of time. Even the stores are also reduced their assortments and categories from shopping as the prime focus on groceries. During the lockdowns, it is evident that there was a huge spike in demand (Pull-based demand) for groceries. Customers used to turn up 3 to 4 times higher than normal, this used to result in the stock-outs in various grocery assortments. Hence many customers end up in incomplete shopping and return without sufficient purchases of required goods. The staff is used to fail to provide the required services to the customers due to rushing up of customers to check-out counters there was a poor delivery of customer service. However, this used to be reasonable once the normalcy was restored.

Upon the government authorities' directions, the market used to operate in limited hours. Hence when customers desired for buying goods on an urgent basis, the retail stores used to be unavailable. Hence, they need to suffer from shortages till the stores reopen. The enforcement authorities are used to strict in maintaining the timings and heavy penalties are used to impose on the store that does not adhere to timings and any other directions. Customers used to clean vegetables once they were carried to their homes suspecting virus contamination had already taken place.

## 7.0 Conclusion

The study is covered wide variety of aspects relating to customer safety and virus prevention measures followed by retail stores, customers as directed by public health authorities. These measures were significant effect on the shopping experience of the customers. The retailers followed strict measures to curb the COVID-19 virus contamination, but the result of unmeasured to extent their outcome. In addition to measures prescribed by government, the retailers also initiated prevention measures, they are broadly classified into entry related, operational related, shopping related and informational related. The customer one side inviting preventing measures, other side felt some sort of inconvenience in shopping experience.

The study revealed that mask and gloves were a compulsory in retail stores. The social distance was practised in all stores, limited was observed in all stores but

## Author's Contribution – Credit Taxonomy

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1. Conceptualization (Supportive)
2. Data curation (Equal)
3. Formal analysis (Lead)
4. Investigation (Supportive)

5. Methodology (Supportive)
6. Validation (Supportive)
7. Visualization (Supportive)
8. Writing (Lead)

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4. Methodology (Lead)
5. Validation (Supportive)
6. Visualization (Supportive)
7. Writing – review & editing (Equal)

### Disclosure of interest:

No Conflict of Interest

### Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

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