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A Study of Retail Availability and Point-of-Sale Visibility of Classic Balanced Taste Longs and Gold Flake Blue Longs in Akola, Maharashtra

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Abstract

In India, cigarette marketing is tightly restricted by law, so retail execution at the counter carries unusual weight for manufacturers. This study examines two aspects of retail execution, product availability and point-of-sale (POS) visibility, for two cigarette variants of ITC Limited, Classic Balanced Taste Longs and Gold Flake Blue Longs, in Akola, Maharashtra. It uses a descriptive, observational field design. During an internship from 18 May to 18 July 2026, outlet visits were recorded as binary availability and display observations. After data cleaning, 123 valid outlet-visit observations were analysed from a convenience sample; the sample cannot be treated as representative of Akola. Classic Balanced Taste Longs was available in 87 of 123 observations (70.7%) and Gold Flake Blue Longs in 72 (58.5%). Among observations where each variant was available, it was displayed in 49 of 87 (56.3%) and 36 of 72 (50.0%) cases respectively. Neither variant was available in 30 observations (24.4%) and both in 66 (53.7%). Reported outlet-type differences should be read cautiously because outlet type was inferred from names. No causal or sales conclusions can be drawn. The study illustrates how a simple, repeatable outlet audit can reveal availability and display gaps, and it proposes compliance-aligned monitoring practices consistent with tobacco-control law.

Keywords: retail execution; product availability; point-of-sale visibility; distribution management; FMCG retailing; outlet-level audit; tobacco regulation

1. Introduction

In fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) categories, marketing plans succeed or fail at the shelf. Retail execution refers to the extent to which a manufacturer's intended in-store conditions, such as stock being present and products being placed where shoppers can see them, are realised in practice. Two of its core indicators are distinct. *Availability* is whether the product is physically present and offered for sale. *Point-of-sale visibility* is how openly the product is placed once it is in stock.

The relevance of availability is well documented. A worldwide study of FMCG out-of-stocks concluded that shelf unavailability had persisted for decades without clear improvement and that shoppers increasingly switch brands when their choice is missing (Corsten & Gruen, 2003). Small independent outlets, which dominate traditional retail in India, present particular measurement and replenishment challenges, and out-of-stock behaviour in independent grocery stores has been studied empirically (Aastrup & Kotzab, 2009).

Cigarettes are an unusual FMCG case. Under the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act, 2003 (COTPA), advertising of tobacco products is prohibited, with a limited allowance for point-of-sale boards that meet prescribed conditions (Government of India, 2003; Goel et al., 2014). The sale of tobacco products to minors is also prohibited.



For manufacturers, with mass-media channels closed, the counter is therefore a principal place where brand presence is determined. This paper treats that observation as context only. It does not argue that greater availability or display should be pursued for its own sake, and it acknowledges a substantial public-health literature linking POS tobacco exposure with smoking-related outcomes (Paynter & Edwards, 2009; Robertson et al., 2015).

The study was conducted in Akola, Maharashtra, and compares two variants within one manufacturer's portfolio: Classic Balanced Taste Longs and Gold Flake Blue Longs. Comparing two variants across the same outlets holds the market and fieldwork conditions broadly constant, so that differences in observed availability and display are easier to interpret descriptively.

2. Research Problem and Contribution

Practical problem. During fieldwork, a variant could be absent from an outlet or present but kept out of sight, and neither condition is visible in aggregate sales reports. The problem investigated is how often each condition occurred for the two variants in the sampled Akola outlets.

Literature gap. The sources reviewed in Section 4 address out-of-stocks, shelf-display effects and tobacco POS regulation. This study did not conduct a systematic search for research on small-outlet cigarette variant audits in Indian towns, so it makes no claim that no such research exists.

Contribution. The contribution is local and practical: a documented, transparent outlet-level snapshot for two variants in one town, with explicit denominators, a data-cleaning trail and a candid account of measurement weaknesses.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

The objectives are limited to what the dataset can support. Sales, market share, consumer preference, purchase intention and competitor availability were not measured and are not examined.

Objective	Research question
O1. Measure availability of each variant	RQ1. What proportion of valid observations showed each variant available?
O2. Measure display of each variant where available	RQ2. Among observations where each variant was available, what proportion showed it displayed?
O3. Compare the variants	RQ3. How did availability, display and joint availability differ between the variants?
O4. Examine outlet-type patterns	RQ4. How did observed availability differ across outlet types, given the limits of the classification?
O5. Draw implications for monitoring	RQ5. What monitoring and data-quality issues can reasonably be identified from the field data?

4. Review of Literature

The literature is organised around three themes that frame the present measures. The sources are a deliberately small, verified set, and the review does not claim to be exhaustive.

Availability and out-of-stocks. Corsten and Gruen (2003) reported a worldwide study of the extent, causes and consumer responses to out-of-stocks in FMCG. They concluded that out-of-stock rates had not meaningfully fallen over a decade, that consumers increasingly switch brands when the desired one is absent, and that the supply chain bears much of the responsibility, with solutions needed on the shop floor. Grant and Fernie (2008) described on-shelf availability as a key challenge for all retailers and noted that consumer reactions range from product substitution to seeking the product elsewhere, while calling for more research on causes. Aastrup and Kotzab (2009) examined out-of-stocks in independent grocery stores, the retail format closest to the small outlets studied here. The relevance of



these studies is twofold. They justify treating availability as a measurable execution indicator, and they warn that an observed absence has several possible causes that a single visit cannot separate. Their findings concern grocery categories and should not be assumed to transfer directly to cigarettes.

Visibility and in-store display. Chandon et al. (2009) used an eye-tracking experiment on supermarket shelves to study how the number and position of shelf facings affect shoppers' attention to and evaluation of brands, interacting with out-of-store factors such as brand usage. The study supports the general idea that placement influences what shoppers notice. It does not measure cigarettes, small Indian outlets or binary display judgements, so it provides only a conceptual rationale for recording display separately from availability.

Tobacco POS exposure and regulation. Paynter and Edwards (2009) systematically reviewed 12 peer-reviewed studies and reported associations between POS tobacco promotion and smoking susceptibility among youth, and the authors argued that these findings justified banning POS displays. Robertson et al. (2015) updated this evidence with 20 studies, each reporting findings consistent with a positive association between POS tobacco promotion exposure and smoking or related cognitions, and noted that several jurisdictions had adopted display bans. In India, observational compliance studies using checklists have examined POS conditions. Goel et al. (2014) surveyed 1,860 points of sale in three jurisdictions and concluded that POS advertising was extensively used despite Section 5. Goel et al. (2016) reported, for one North Indian city, that 42.3% of points of sale had tobacco advertisements and 73.1% displayed tobacco products where minors could see them. These studies have an important implication for the present paper. What this study calls display is a physical placement measure, whereas the public-health literature treats POS exposure as a policy concern. The present results are therefore reported descriptively and are not framed as a performance target to maximise.

Synthesis. Taken together, the literature supports measuring availability and display as separate constructs, cautions against inferring causes from a single observation, and requires that any discussion of tobacco display be located within its regulatory and public-health setting. Direct comparisons of the present percentages with prior studies are avoided because definitions, products and settings differ.

5. Conceptual Framework

The framework is descriptive, not causal. Outlet characteristics (type, and the unmeasured factors of retailer choice and supply reach) are expected to be associated with observed availability. Display is observed only where the product is in stock and is therefore conditional on availability. Retail execution, in this paper, is the joint pattern of the two observed indicators.

Observed availability	Observed display (if available)	Descriptive reading
Not available	Not recorded	Availability gap at the time of visit; cause unknown
Available	Not displayed	Product in stock but not openly placed
Available	Displayed	Product in stock and openly placed

No relationship between these conditions and sales, consumer behaviour or compliance with COTPA was measured. Retailer behaviour, distributor reach and demand are unmeasured and appear only as possible explanations in Section 8.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research design

The study is descriptive and observational, field-based, and primarily quantitative. It tests no formal hypotheses and applies no inferential tests, because the sample is non-probabilistic.



6.2 Study area, population and unit of analysis

The study area is Akola, Maharashtra. The population of interest is retail outlets selling cigarettes encountered on assigned field routes. The unit of analysis is the *outlet-visit observation*, one row recording one visit to one outlet. It is not a unique outlet. Outlet names were the only identifier recorded. In the 123 valid observations, 112 distinct outlet names appear and 11 names appear twice (22 observations), so some outlets were probably observed more than once. Name matching is not a verified outlet identifier, and the figures below are therefore percentages of observations.

6.3 Sample size and data cleaning

The field workbook contained 142 outlet-visit rows: a 13-row preliminary round that was not split by variant, and ten variant-level rounds containing 129 rows. One round that exactly duplicated an earlier round (20 rows) was removed. Six of the 129 variant-level rows had no usable entries for either variant and were excluded, leaving **123 valid observations**, which form the base for every percentage in this paper. Yes/No text and variant labels were standardised. The 13 preliminary-round rows are not in the analytical base. Section 12 and Appendix B note an unresolved arithmetic inconsistency in how the report describes the effect of removing the duplicate round on the row total of 142.

6.4 Sampling technique

Outlets were not randomly selected. They were the outlets encountered on assigned routes during the internship, a convenience (or purposive) sample, and the findings describe only the outlets covered.

6.5 Data sources and instrument

Primary data are the field observations recorded in a spreadsheet. For each outlet-visit, the observer recorded four Yes/No fields: availability and display for each variant. *Availability = Yes* required the variant to be physically in stock and offered at the time of the visit. *Display = Yes* meant the variant was placed in a visibly accessible position rather than kept out of sight (for example in a drawer or back shelf). Display is therefore a judgement-based binary measure. Informal retailer conversations were not recorded on a questionnaire and are not analysed as data. No consumer data, competitor data, prices, quantities or visit dates were captured. Secondary sources were used only for context.

6.6 Outlet-type classification

Outlet type was assigned by keyword matching on outlet names, producing five types plus an "other" group. This is an approximation. The classification could not be exactly reproduced from the appendix dataset during verification (Appendix B), so type-level results are reported as presented in the source report and treated as indicative.

6.7 Measures and analysis

Availability rate = observations where the variant was available ÷ 123 × 100.

Display rate among available observations = observations where the variant was available and displayed ÷ observations where it was available × 100.

The analysis uses counts, percentages, cross-tabulation of joint availability and descriptive comparison across outlet types.

6.8 Ethical and regulatory considerations

The study observed outlets and did not collect personal data on consumers. No retailer names are reported here. The source report does not document formal ethical approval or consent procedures, and none is claimed. The paper does not advocate tobacco consumption and treats display as an observed condition governed by law (Government of India, 2003).



7. Data Analysis and Results

All results below were recalculated from the 123-row cleaned dataset in the source report's Appendix C, except where stated.

7.1 Availability

Table 1. Availability by variant (n = 123 valid observations)

Variant	Available (n)	Not available (n)	Availability rate
Classic Balanced Taste Longs	87	36	70.7%
Gold Flake Blue Longs	72	51	58.5%

Note. The difference is 12.2 percentage points. Percentages refer to outlet-visit observations.

Classic Balanced Taste Longs was observed as available more often than Gold Flake Blue Longs. Round-level availability varied widely (Classic: 38.9% to 86.7%; Gold Flake Blue: 27.3% to 83.3%, with 6 to 18 valid observations per round), which suggests that area and outlet mix, not a single city-wide pattern, drive the results. Round numbers are not calendar dates, so no time trend can be inferred.

7.2 Display among available observations

Table 2. Display rate among available observations

Variant	Denominator (available)	Available and displayed	Available, not displayed	Display rate
Classic Balanced Taste Longs	87	49	38	56.3%
Gold Flake Blue Longs	72	36	36	50.0%

Note. Display is not expressed as a percentage of all 123 observations. As a share of all observations, the available-and-displayed counts are 39.8% (49/123) and 29.3% (36/123), which is a different measure and is not used for comparison.

The display rate was 6.3 percentage points higher for Classic Balanced Taste Longs. Roughly half of the stocked observations of Gold Flake Blue Longs and 43.7% of those for Classic were not displayed according to the observer's judgement.

7.3 Joint availability

Table 3. Joint availability of the two variants (n = 123)

Pattern	Observations	Share
Both variants available	66	53.7%
Only Classic Balanced Taste Longs available	21	17.1%
Only Gold Flake Blue Longs available	6	4.9%
Neither variant available	30	24.4%

In the 27 observations where exactly one variant was present, it was Classic in 21 and Gold Flake Blue in 6. This is a descriptive observation only, and no significance test is reported.



Table 4. Display pattern where both variants were available (n = 66)

Pattern	Observations	Share of 66
Both displayed	32	48.5%
Only Classic displayed	7	10.6%
Only Gold Flake Blue displayed	3	4.5%
Neither displayed	24	36.4%

7.4 Outlet type

Table 5. Availability by inferred outlet type (percentages as reported in the source report; not independently reproduced)

Outlet type (inferred from name)	n	Classic available	Gold Flake Blue available
Pan shops / pan centres	80	70.0%	56.2%
Tea stalls	10	70.0%	60.0%
Cold drinks / general counters	9	88.9%	77.8%
Eateries / uphar gruha	9	44.4%	33.3%
General / kirana stores	5	100.0%	60.0%
Other	10	70.0%	80.0%

Note. Group sizes sum to 123. Four groups have 10 or fewer observations, so each percentage rests on very few outlets (for example, 100% in the kirana group is five observations). The type-level pattern is indicative only.

7.5 Data-quality finding

In the appendix dataset, 13 observations for Classic and 9 for Gold Flake Blue show display recorded as Yes where availability was recorded as No. This is logically inconsistent with the definition of display. Because the display rate in Table 2 counts only observations that are both available and displayed, these records do not enter it. They do, however, explain why other summary figures in the source report (71.3% and 62.5%) differ from Table 2: those figures divide all display "Yes" entries (62 and 45) by the available counts (87 and 72), which mixes bases. They are not used in this paper.

8. Discussion

As recorded, Classic Balanced Taste Longs was more often found in stock than Gold Flake Blue Longs (70.7% against 58.5%), and, where stocked, was somewhat more often displayed (56.3% against 50.0%). Both variants were absent in nearly a quarter of observations (24.4%), the single largest joint pattern after both being present. These are direct observations of conditions at the time of the visit.

The data cannot say *why*. An absence may reflect supply reach, retailer choice, low local demand or a temporary stock-out, which parallels the multi-cause view of out-of-stocks in the literature (Corsten & Gruen, 2003; Grant & Fernie, 2008). The source report notes that retailers at outlets stocking neither variant informally cited low walk-in demand for these variants, but this was an unrecorded general impression and is not treated as a finding. The greater Classic–Gold Flake gap at eateries and some other groups is a hypothesis for follow-up, not a result, given the group sizes and the approximate classification.

The gap between availability and display shows that stocking does not by itself imply open placement. How to interpret this depends on the setting. Chandon et al. (2009) provide a general reason to expect placement to matter for



attention. However, the tobacco POS literature (Paynter & Edwards, 2009; Robertson et al., 2015) means that open display of cigarettes is itself a public-health and regulatory concern, so the display rate is best read as an audit indicator and not as a gap to be closed. Nothing in these data links availability or display to sales or consumer behaviour.

9. Key Findings

Quantitative findings (n = 123 valid outlet-visit observations)

1. Classic Balanced Taste Longs was available in 87 observations (70.7%) and Gold Flake Blue Longs in 72 (58.5%) (Table 1).
2. Among available observations, display was recorded for 49 of 87 (56.3%) and 36 of 72 (50.0%) respectively (Table 2).
3. Both variants were available in 66 observations (53.7%) and neither in 30 (24.4%) (Table 3).
4. Where both were available, both were displayed in 32 of 66 observations (48.5%) and neither in 24 (36.4%) (Table 4).
5. Reported availability was lowest at eateries and highest at cold-drinks/general counters and kirana stores, on small groups (Table 5).

Qualitative observations. Informal retailer conversations were not systematically recorded and yield no formal findings.

Interpretation. Availability and display are separable conditions, and a single-visit audit can show *that* a gap exists, not *why*.

10. Managerial Implications

The following are proposals informed by the study. Their effectiveness has not been tested, and all must remain within tobacco-control law, including the advertising restrictions and the prohibition on sale to minors (Government of India, 2003).

- **Monitor availability.** The 24.4% joint-absence pattern identifies where coverage review could begin, after first checking whether absences reflect deliberate retailer choice or genuine supply gaps.
- **Strengthen the audit design.** Record a unique outlet identifier, visit date and area, so that outlets can be separated from repeat visits and trends can be tracked.
- **Define display against a written standard.** A predefined observation scale would reduce subjectivity. The standard should be framed around compliance with legal display and signage requirements. It should not be used to set targets for greater prominence of tobacco products.
- **Use audits for compliance as well as execution.** The same visits could record whether required boards and notices are in place, in line with prior Indian compliance surveys (Goel et al., 2014).
- **Prioritise causal diagnosis.** A short structured retailer questionnaire would separate supply, preference and demand explanations before any intervention is considered.

11. Limitations

1. **Single market and convenience sample.** Results describe sampled Akola outlets only and cannot be generalised to Akola or India.
2. **Observations, not unique outlets.** Repeated visits to the same outlets are likely (112 distinct names across 123 observations), and the identifier is a name only.
3. **Time-bound and undated rounds.** Observations come from one internship period, and rounds carry no calendar date.
4. **Binary and subjective display measure.** Display is a single observer's judgement, without a graded or documented standard.
5. **Approximate outlet classification.** Types were inferred from names, and some groups contain fewer than ten observations.



6. **Data-recording inconsistencies.** Section 7.5 and Appendix B describe records where display was marked Yes without availability, and unresolved totals in the data-cleaning narrative.
7. **No structured retailer or consumer data, no competitor data and no sales data.** Causes and consequences cannot be assessed.
8. **No inferential statistics.** Differences are descriptive and cannot be called statistically significant.
9. **Observer effects are unassessed.** Retailers may have adjusted stock or display when approached; this was not measured.

12. Future Research Directions

Future work could (a) repeat audits over a longer period with dated visits and unique outlet identifiers; (b) extend coverage to additional towns, with a documented sampling frame; (c) use a predefined display scale and a second observer to estimate agreement; (d) add a structured retailer questionnaire on stocking reasons; and (e) examine associations with sales only if reliable sales data become available. Any such study involving tobacco products must comply with applicable law and research-ethics requirements. These are proposals and were not part of the original internship.

13. Conclusion

The study answers its research questions within the limits of a 123-observation convenience sample. Classic Balanced Taste Longs was recorded as available more often than Gold Flake Blue Longs, was displayed somewhat more often where available, and both variants were jointly absent in about a quarter of observations. Outlet-type differences are indicative only. The study's contribution is a transparent, replicable local audit and a clear separation between availability and display, together with candid documentation of its weaknesses. Systematic outlet audits can reveal where conditions differ, but their findings must be interpreted within the evidence available and within the legal and public-health context of tobacco products.

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Appendix A. Variable Definitions

Variable	Categories	Definition
Availability (per variant)	Yes / No	Variant physically in stock and offered at the time of visit
Display (per variant)	Yes / No	Variant placed visibly accessible rather than kept out of sight; intended to be recorded only where available
Outlet type	Five types plus other	Inferred from outlet name; approximate
Valid observation	Row with usable entries	One outlet-visit row after cleaning (n = 123)

Appendix B. Verification Notes and Quality-Control Summary (remove before submission)

Items needing your confirmation

1. **Product name.** Your brief says "Classic Refined Taste Longs". The uploaded report says "Classic Balanced Taste Longs" throughout, and its source spreadsheet labels were "Classic Mild Longs" and "Classic mild". This paper follows the report. Please confirm the correct name, then use find-and-replace.
2. **Display rates in the report's Executive Summary (71.3% and 62.5%) conflict with Chapter 7 (56.3% and 50.0%).** I recalculated from Appendix C. The values 56.3% (49/87) and 50.0% (36/72) are correct for the stated definition. The 71.3% and 62.5% figures come from counting 62 and 45 display "Yes" entries over available counts, including 13 and 9 observations where display was Yes but availability was No.
3. **Round-wise display table (Table 7.4a in your report)** appears to use the same unconditional display counts, so its display percentages are not comparable with Table 2 and were omitted.
4. **Raw-row arithmetic.** The report describes 142 rows as 13 + 129 after removing the duplicate round, but Table 6.2 says 142 → 122 on removal. Both cannot hold. 13 + 129 = 142 is consistent with the round table, so I used that, but you should confirm which is correct.
5. **Eatery availability.** The Executive Summary gives 28.6% for Gold Flake Blue at eateries, but Table 7.4 gives 33.3%. I used Table 7.4 and flagged it as unreproduced.
6. **Outlet-type counts** (80/10/9/9/5/10) could not be reproduced from outlet names with plausible keyword rules, so Table 5 is quoted as reported.
7. **Distinct outlets.** 112 distinct names appear across 123 observations (11 names twice). This is a name match only.

Verified from the dataset: 123 observations; availability 87/72; display among available 49/87 and 36/72; joint availability 66/21/6/30; display pattern among the 66 (32/7/3/24).

Sources. All nine references were located online. Grant and Fernie (2008) page numbers and Aastrup and Kotzab (2009) DOI were not confirmed, and Aastrup and Kotzab's bibliographic details were confirmed through a citation list rather than the publisher page. Their content is described only at the level the abstracts support. COTPA provisions were checked through secondary summaries; please check the Act and rules text before submission. No statistical test was run.

Content decisions. Your report's Recommendation 2 ("close the visibility gap") was not carried over, because raising the prominence of tobacco products conflicts with COTPA and your brief. Section 10 reframes display as a



compliance-aligned audit. Company-history, internship-learning and consumer-feedback material was left out, since no such data were collected.

Length. The paper is about 4,000 words excluding references, near the lower end of your target, because the evidence supports a focused paper.

Unresolved: points 1 to 7 above; formal ethics approval or consent is not documented in the report.