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INTERIOR DESIGN, A VALUABLE BUSINESS RESOURCE FOR LEBANESE MALLS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Consumer Behavior is a continuous challenge for all marketers. People's attitude might change from one day to another, and their perception on product quality and environment choice is affected most importantly by the design and atmosphere of the space. The critical economic crisis of Lebanon, in parallel with the coronavirus pandemic, had an evident influence on malls' consumer behavior. The article presents the results of a survey on the Lebanese population conducted by the author in November 2021, focusing mainly on shopping mall customers and on the impact of COVID-19 on their behavior. The study proves that shopping malls

interior design can be a valuable business resource, and outlines to what extent mall owners can benefit from this feature by applying new measurements to attract people's attention, bring them back to their physical shopping and reassure their presence in shops; especially that the imposed COVID-19 lockdown and the economic crisis of the country indulged people to cocoon at home and rely on online services. This article also states different safety measures, in design, that can be taken in consideration to encourage customers to socialize in malls. It explains what is meant by Interior Design and the different components of design that can enhance the space and its circulation and therefore its functionality to gain more potential customers and increase the purchases and services.

Keywords: interior design; malls; customers; consumers behavior; pandemic; economic crisis; physical shopping; atmosphere; marketing strategy.

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ДИЗАЙН ИНТЕРЬЕРА — ЦЕННЫЙ БИЗНЕС-РЕСУРС ДЛЯ ЛИВАНСКИХ ТОРГОВЫХ ЦЕНТРОВ В УСЛОВИЯХ ПАНДЕМИИ COVID-19

Исследование поведения потребителей — задача любого маркетолога, требующая постоянного решения. Отношение людей к процессам, вещам и окружению может существенно меняться в краткосрочном периоде. На восприятие потребителя в значительной степени влияют дизайн и атмосфера помещения, в котором он находится. Вследствие серьезного экономического кризиса в Ливане, протекающего в условиях пандемии коронавирусной инфекции, в поведении потребителей возникли масштабные корректировки. В статье приведены результаты опроса населения Ливана, проведенного автором в ноябре 2021 г., в котором основное внимание уделялось покупателям торговых центров и влиянию COVID-19 на их поведение. В статье доказано, что дизайн интерьера торговых центров может быть ценным бизнес-ресурсом. Работа с дизайном интерьера торгового центра может позволить привлечь внимание людей, вернуть их к физическим покупкам и их присутствию в магазинах, что особенно актуально, поскольку введенный локдаун COVID-19 и экономический кризис в стране привели к тому, что люди массово стали полагаться на онлайн-сервисы. В статье также изложены различные приемы в работе с интерьером, которые позволят создать условия для эпидемиологической безопасности на территории торгового центра и при этом обеспечить физическое присутствие потребителей в магазинах.

Ключевые слова: дизайн интерьера; торговые центры; клиенты; поведение потребителей; пандемия; экономический кризис; покупки в оффлайн точках продаж; атмосфера; маркетинговая стратегия.

The COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020 had a very strong impact on the economy worldwide and mainly in Lebanon. Unfortunately, many businesses were brought to halt. Our houses are now the new battleground. People's work, wants and needs are ongoing from this focal point called HOME.

This new lifestyle changed our habits and maybe for a long term. However, we are still far from being robots. Exchanging emotions and physical presence are vital for every human psychological balance. Therefore, retailers are urged to find solutions, create new concepts in stores that obey the social distancing to incite customers to come back and reexperience physical shopping. Their upcoming success is in how much they can help their consumers to navigate this harsh and exceptional time. New customer's necessities popped out, new behaviors adopted; they must be considered and respected to uncover the best new ambiance in malls and stores.

Many studies showed the importance of design and atmosphere in malls. From lighting effect to the layout circulation passing through the scent and sound. Would Interior Design be a valuable business resource to bring loyal customers back to physical shopping after the pandemic, especially that one of the most severe economic crises hit Lebanon in 2021?

Consumers' financial and psychological situation is taking the lead over their attitudes and decisions in buying including the choice of comfort level. Many Malls struggled to survive, and many realized that they should work on a real solution to reassure the long-term existence of their businesses. The pandemic has sent the population around the world indoor, what lead to a change in their lifestyle and in their behavior as consumers.

To perfect customers' physical experience, businesses must plan and aim to reach strong brand loyalty that is an important factor to incite consumers' satisfaction and employees' devotion. Customer service becomes more efficient and company achievements more successful.

The COVID-19 lockdown made customers impulsive about their choices, too much stress and too much fear to think rationally [1]. They are uncertain, under stress and anxious. Many articles studied the emotional and behavioral response to Coronavirus. They are ready to buy anything that might be useful for their hygiene and health even if not needed. People are becoming very emotional in their selections [2].

Coronavirus high and incessant exposures to news reports increase risk of severe anxiety and stress and might lead to psychological disturbs.

Miss used of alcohol, insomnia drugs and many more anxiety problems emerged due to the isolation, loss of income and fear from the days to come [3].

A major shift in consumer behavior is noticed around the world due to Coronavirus. Researcher Potloc and Salesforce data came up with a survey that over a third of the customers is more conscious now about shopping. Almost half of them pay more attention to quality and durability than before. In addition, products are assessed for their social benefits. Here again, the marketing strategy lies on emotions and aims to a social welfare plan [4].

A questionnaire prepared by the author, held on Google on November 2021, answered by 308 persons from Lebanon who usually visit malls and counted as potential customers gave some statistics about the changes in consumers 'behavior (fig. 1 and 2).

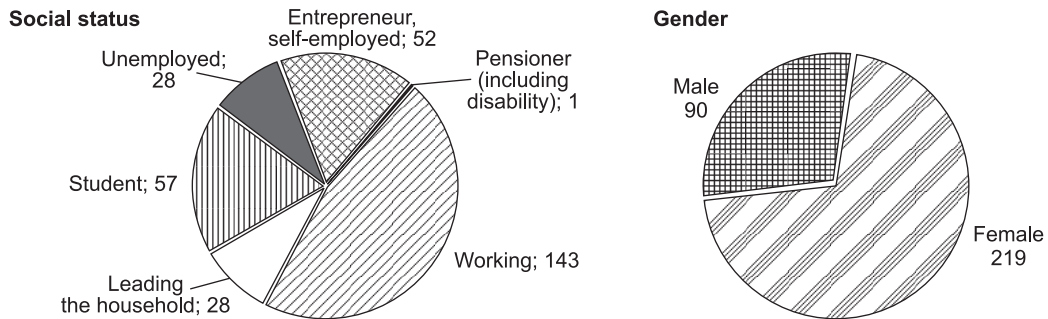


Fig. 1. Sample structure

Source: compiled by the author.

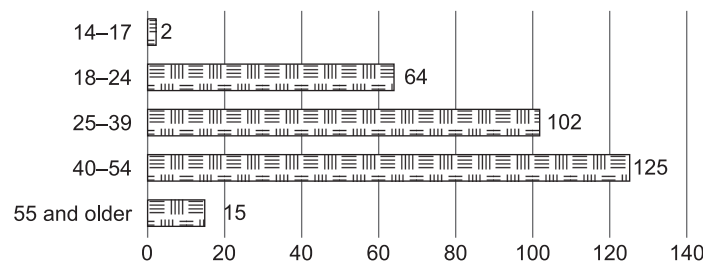


Fig. 2. Sample Population Age

Source: compiled by the author.

The fig. 1 and 2 cover the details about the sample of the questionnaire. Age percentage varies between 16 and 75 years old with different occupation statuses, 70.9 % of which are females and 29.1 % males.

Figure 3 below showed that almost 53 % of people changed their shopping goals recently; therefore, those consumers are now buying anything affordable and paying less attention to quality and durability than before.

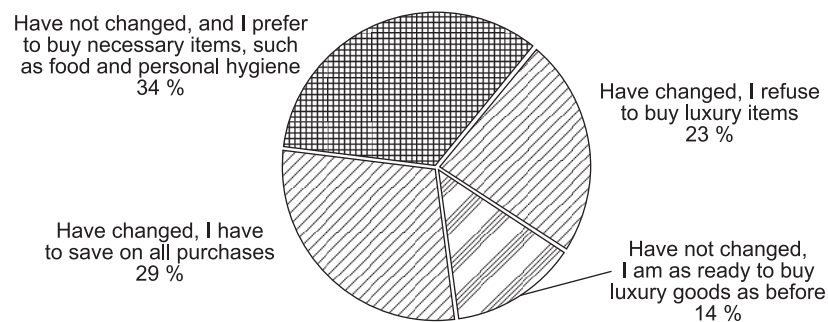


Fig. 3. Lebanese people behavioral change

Source: compiled by the author.

Those results are also affected by the economic crisis of the country. Lebanon had to endure a fast rise in unemployment rate those past 2 years in addition to a serious threat on the survival of many organizations that were stable before December 2019. This factor is directly associated to psychological disorder and mental concern [5].

Lebanon is a special case country in its economic and political situation. Beside the lockdown and its impact on the Lebanese economy, a very intricate crisis hit this country and devastated its economy.

Inequalities unemployment, immigration and poverty best described the situation (fig. 4). The economy always relied on a competitive and free market regime with a strong Lebanese currency that gives advantage to traders at the expense of agriculturalists and industrialists.

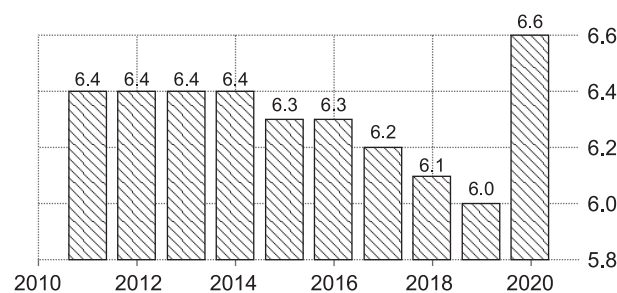


Fig. 4. Trading Economics: Lebanon unemployment rate December 2010 — December 2020

Source: compiled by the author based on [5].

The authorities were only interested in sectors where politicians could invest and profit, the Banks and the Real Estate. The civil war ended in 1990, and it was about time to rebuild the country. The Taef Agreement established the division of power between the «Troika» members that are the President, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament. In 1992,

Rafic Hariri, due to his fortune and international public relations, could impose himself and stabilize the Lebanese Pound at around 1800LL per 1USD. He arranged a tripartite pact between the government, the banks and the Banque du Liban where banks had to finance the government debt in exchange of weighty interest rates, which attracted funds from abroad that allowed the central bank to grow its reserve and defend the pounds. Unfortunately, the currency stability lead Lebanon to a very high cost today. The public debt multiplied by almost 28 times between 1993 and 2018 due to the corruption and inflation [6]. High bank interests and government financial support on all essentials like electricity, fuel, medicine, flour and petrol made of this country the cheapest and most attractive to invest in.

To summarize the situation, Lebanon was like heaven on earth, known as «La Suisse du Moyen-Orient», «Switzerland of the Middle East». Best hospitals, best academic institutions, best nightlife, and touristic activities of the whole Middle East area till the dream dropped and faded away. Everything was mainly imported, lack of exportation. Furthermore, on August 4, 2020, all port activities were stopped due to the outrageous, scandalous merciless Beirut explosion which affected the trades and led the country to a complete turmoil. Central bank is out of dollars, internal banks are also out of dollars, all politicians, businessmen and foreigners from the UAE transferred their money due to political decisions, the pound dropped and is still dropping. Today, November 2020, the only rate available is the black market 24,500LL/1\$. The last official rate of 1,507LL is just a number, a virtual rate [7]. Lebanon is unfortunately enduring a very acute inflation leading most of the population to poverty and the country to an unsafe place to live in.

Figure 5 showed the rise of Consumer Price Index in Lebanon to 378 index points in May 2021. The maximum level was 378 index points and minimum was 76,72 index points. The World Bank estimations: 50 % of Lebanese population is counted as poor. That is 13 % rise in 2020 and increased in 2021.

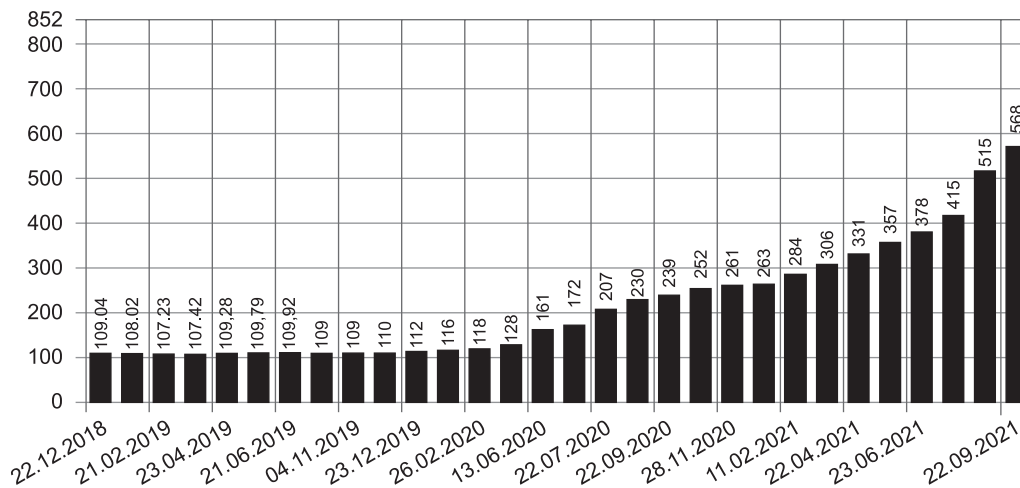


Fig. 5. Consumer price index (CPI) in Lebanon

Source: compiled by the author based on [8].

As stated above, people in Lebanon today are shopping mindfully, valuing brands rising and choosing the best quality-price value. It is no more the time to buy any luxury item to spoil the ego. Customers are cost-conscious and choose the need over the demand. They live with no electricity no fuel and no medicines available, lacking the least of any citizen's right.

To encourage and motivate those people to come back to shopping or at least to their usual social life is a real challenge. However, who knows the Lebanese population knows how much they love life, fun and design, they aim for a better lifestyle with all what they are enduring. Adding nice atmosphere and creative designs to malls, taking care of its restaurants and shops would be a main added value.

The recent study done in November 2021 showed in figure 6 that people are still interested in design and atmosphere of the malls they visit. Those factors have an important impact on their choices. 40,3 % (124 persons) chose the nice atmosphere, and 9,7 % (30 persons) design so in overall 50 % are looking for design and the atmospheric (fig. 6).

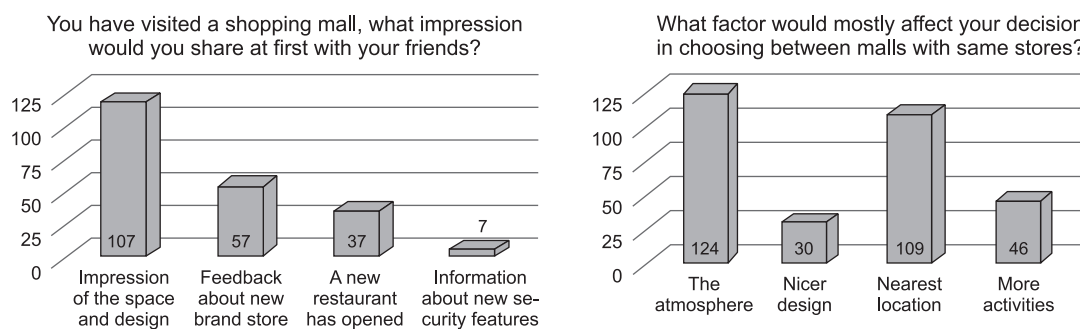


Fig. 6. Factors affecting customers' first impression and decisions in a mall

Source: compiled by the author.

Talking about numbers, for 67,2 % of respondents (207 persons out of which 150 are females) first impression would be about the design and space. Herewith 143 persons belonging to an economically active age (from 26 to 60 years). Nevertheless, to one degree or another, all genders and generations are interested in this factor (fig. 7).

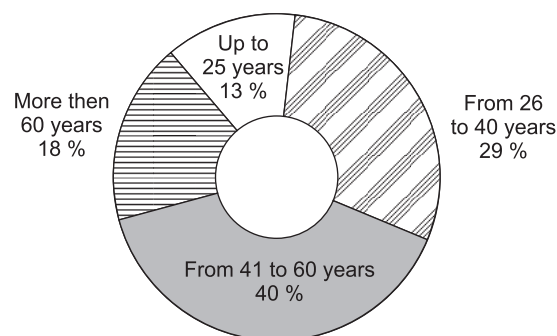


Fig. 7. Importance of Design by Age Group

Source: compiled by the author.

Beirut is still alive and the few places that survived to this crisis are still open, and people are still doing the effort to go and experience those places. Figure 8 indicates that the majority 239 out of 308 persons would like to reexperience physical shopping and 201 persons miss revisiting malls and mingling with others. Only few disagree to come back to their usual lifestyle and this is understandable due to the stress and lack of income at the same time.

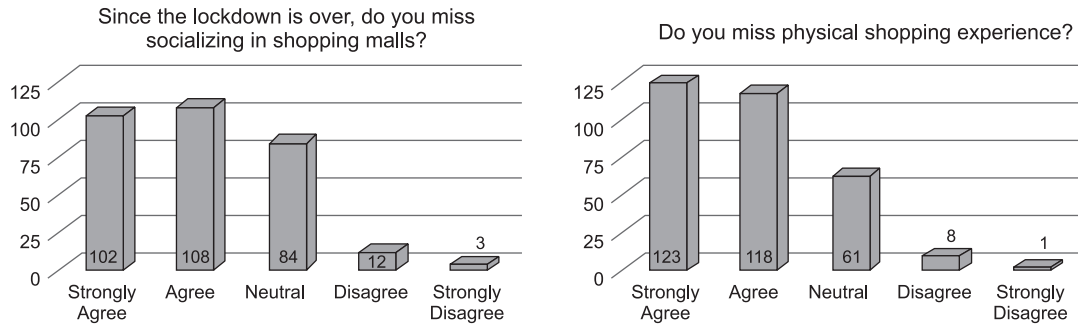


Fig. 8. Importance of physical communication

Source: compiled by the author.

Despite everything, novelties, socialization and physical shopping motivate the Lebanese population. Therefore, working on their needs and demands would affect their behavior as mall consumers and their presence in shopping centers.

No one can deny that the self-quarantine and lack of physical activities affect the well-being of individuals. The come back to previous active lifestyle is a must, though not guaranteed with the desire of cocooning with all the opportunities it can offer.

Despite restrictions lifting, people are still feeling very comfortable at home and are trying to fulfill all their needs and duties from there. No more movies, restaurants and malls during weekends, it is mainly about to get entertained by watching TV, cook a nice meal in our own kitchen and socialize through any Google platform.

However, this contentment is not granted to all. Home is not always the securest place to be. Along with all the psychological stress people are tolerating, are high risk factors for aggression and domestic violence (Bavel et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the stress leads to lack of sleeping that complicates cohabitation between family members (Islam et al., 2020).

On one hand, older adults that are now deprived from social contacts are left completely disconnected with the outer world especially that they are far from technology and social media. On the other hand, children are also in a harsh situation during lockdown. They are bored, lack places for physical activities and left with limited social connections. All those factors might mark their future and adult life (Fegert et al., 2020; Jiao et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020).

Even students got their share with this quarantine period. Many suicide and depression cases have been reported due to anxiety and instability in schedule, exams and inability of online access (Mamun et al., 2020).

Sometimes it is difficult and challenging to request from people to follow basic precautions like staying home when those restricting measures clash with their norms, values and culture. Worshipping rituals, cultural activities and even shopping are a must for many individuals to maintain a stable lifecycle [2].

Figure 9 reveals that COVID-19 affected 66.8 % of the chosen sample. The reasons stated by those people could be reviewed as follow.

96 persons had a bad experience and couldn't surpass this pandemic lockdown smoothly: they lost loved ones, they lost their jobs, they are living under stress with anxiety, they feel alone and depressed, they miss socializing, lack of communication, the COVID-19 changed their habits, they are not able to go out freely they have to manage between the precautions they need to take to stay safe and what they enjoy, online versus physical shopping affected their routine.

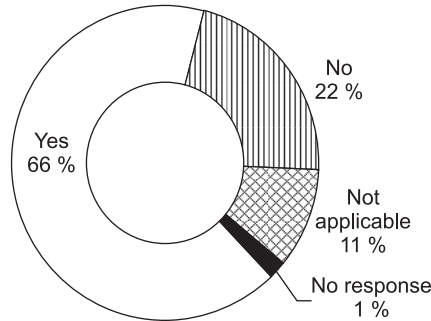


Fig. 9. Impact of lockdown on people

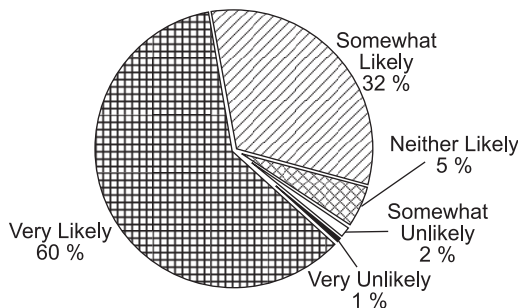
Source: compiled by the author.

However, there is always a glow of positive vibes in everything in life, and what might be negative to some turnout to be positive for others. 50 persons could take advantage of the lockdown; they gained:

- quality time with the loved ones, kids, parents and in-laws;
- strengthened family bonding, maturity and gratefulness;
- learned a lot about health, patience and discipline, the importance of priorities in life;
- put things into perspective and reconsider many aspects in life;
- time to take care of newborns and housework for some married students with the online learning;
- time to stay nearby their parents;
- to spend less (for some students who live in dorms);
- saving expenses;
- saving transportation time since everything is online;
- to enjoy self-quality time.

Nevertheless, even if a person seems good at home, after almost 2 years of lockdown and a very critical economic situation, people are tired from zoom meetings and phone calls. Virtual meetings are becoming less meaningful. Folks miss each other, the lack of physical socialization and the deprivation of gatherings induced stress and depression. Its time for a change and adjust to live outings with social distancing when needed. This is revealed in fig. 10.

How likely are you to come back to malls' physical shopping where COVID-19 precautions are taken?



How likely are you to spend money and experience a new place in a mall?

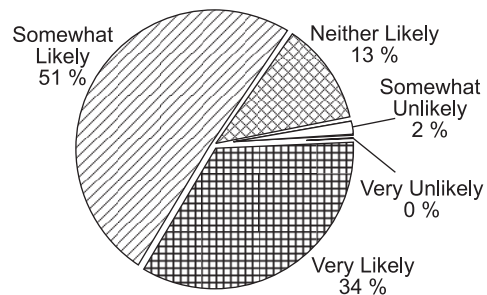


Fig. 10. People willingness towards new mall experiences if COVID-19 precautions are applicable

Source: compiled by the author.

Humans are social creatures that demand permanent communication interaction. The COVID-19 quarantine highlighted this main factor and let people realize how much they miss each other and social interaction like a simple hugs.

Lockdown obliged people to find creative solution to survive. Many people lost their jobs and they had to adapt in a way or another to pay their bills. Even schools with their online learning witness on how much human are irreplaceable and willful. This resilience is our strength and competitive advantage over all other creatures.

The pandemic habits may fade away, however the experience and knowledge people gained will mature their thinking forever.

Moreover, an appropriate atmosphere was always a vital factor to start with to captivate customers and engage them to spend more in any institution. One of the oldest marketing strategies raised by the father of modern marketing, Philip Kotler who developed this concept of atmospheric since 1973 [9]. Troye and Heide in 1987 also linked the store ambience with customer satisfaction and perception about quality.

Figure 11 turned the light on the importance of the atmosphere and lighting on consumer's perception. Such features affect almost 80 % of customers, this percentage rate is extremely high and worth to be taken into consideration by marketers. The same analysis applies to the positive impact of green spaces with 90 % of consumers agreeing and strongly agreeing. Additionally, the future lies on augmented reality and artificial intelligence. This feature is highly correlated with design.

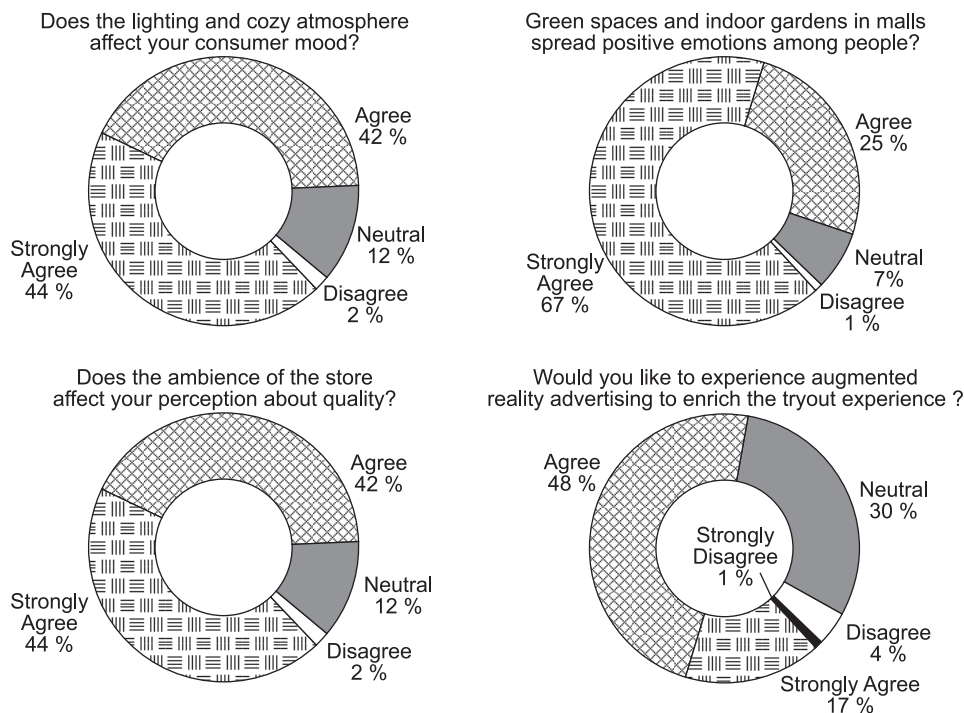


Fig. 11. Importance of a special atmosphere on consumers' perception

Source: compiled by the author.

Consumer behavior is a main factor in a marketing strategy plan. However, customers are human, and their decisions may be unpredictable. Their tastes and attitudes evolve with

time. What might seem perfect and guaranteed around a meeting table can be way less operative in real practice. The more marketers focus on consumer's expectations, needs and desire, the more they hit their target of attracting clients. Therefore, knowing the new trends in consumer's behavior can be a great opportunity to reach their insight and gain a competitive advantage over the market.

Some places spread negative vibes and anxiety, whereas others provoke a sense of comfort and serenity without any obvious reason. Moreover, if the interior Design of a place is striking enough to catch people's attention by its creativity in design the chances that a client will come back increase, irrelevant of the quality of the product served or presented.

Creativity in design includes many factors that customers might not be aware off directly, however those features captivate their visual interest, shake their mood positively and strike their insight unconsciously. What is meant by design is not only the existing furniture or accessories of a place, but mainly:

- the way the space is divided so people can move freely and comfortably, the circulation;
- the nice partitions between different functions;
- the walls, floor and ceiling effects and special treatment;
- the lighting, the colors and many more details.

Some ideas can be implemented to mall designs to get the best out of the environment.

A well-studied and appropriate design can help to reach the following:

- the lobby design gives the first impression. It is the step to catch customer's interest and encourage people to come in and stay;
- the alley design, mainly food court, and also the diversity of functions would attract customers to come back and experience every corner of the shopping mall;
- a recreational area for employees and staff pantry is vital to boost employee's optimism and lead to better customer service;
- a connection to nature with the option of having patios with interior gardens so people won't miss the outdoor feeling all year long. The comfort and importance of the sunlight, greenery and even water is a great added value for nature lovers;
- design virtual reality stands to attract potential customers and initiate people to robotics and artificial intelligence where the future lies. Pandemic imposed a shift to virtual activities like working, socializing and even consuming online. This fact will impact everyone in a way or another. Therefore, leaders will be those who take advantage and use this innovation in an ingenious way in his environment.

Safety measures in design concerning the pandemic high contamination risk:

- besides taking all hygiene precautions, respect the social and psychological needs of customers. Social distancing is a must, respect the space between booths, add well-designed sanitizing stands and maybe add nice partitions to add some privacy when needed in sitting areas;
- have large entrances and exits to avoid queues in front of shops;
- manage cashiers so people won't have to wait a lot and near each other by adding large lanes, many cash desks and also by adding space for stands to "do it yourself" for customers in a hurry or maybe booths where customers can have a seat and do the payment of their carts through an application online. Therefore, use the online to complete and improve the physical shopping activity;
- design lounges and socializing areas with comfortable seats and couches so people can experience the cozy home mood they got used to during the lockdown;
- work on stands to revive the hands-on experience that gives a special flavor to consumer's shopping activity keeping in mind the COVID-19 precautions.

Therefore, Interior design and appropriate atmosphere are physical means that can act as reinforcement factors that have an impact on people's behavior. Figure 12, again attested with numbers and statistics that the Lebanese population is ready to experience new activi-

ties and are willing to change. 53,9 % (167 persons) of potential customers are ready to dive in a new place in town, and 37,3 % (115 persons) would be tempted after the good feedback. Thus, with a creative design and a nice atmosphere almost 90 % of malls consumers would at least try the place once, versus only 8,8 % (27 persons) who prefer their usual routine.

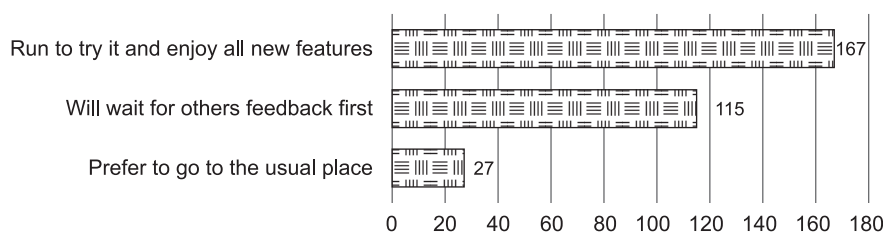


Fig. 12. Consumer interest in new concepts

Source: compiled by the author.

Malls should take over and reinvent authority after the effect lockdown and crisis. If its owners get their supervision on the crisis roughly right and could fascinate Lebanese people attention and invite them outside their bubble, shopping malls have the chance to survive.

Always think out of the box and be creative. As per Scott Hudson, CEO of Henrybuilt, «We know from prior challenging times that when the going gets tough, be creative» [10].

The more distinctive and exclusive you decide to go, the more your place will be valued and considered by people. Therefore, Interior design might be one of the major tools to motivate people and let them come back to their social life and enjoy physical activities and mainly shopping.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed Lebanon and the whole world's habits and behaviors. Some changes turned to be positive experiences and are expected to last longer, especially those that focus on health awareness and value-based purchasing. It is a must that marketers apprehend and study customers' selections and choices to stay relevant.

Interior Designers responsibilities are mainly to enrich the interior environment. Businessmen interest should rely on designers' expertise and aptitudes as valuable assets to entice and uphold a reliable customer base.

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LOGISTIC INTEGRATION OF ECONOMIC ENTITIES: THEORETICAL ASPECT

The article contains an analysis of theoretical approaches to the definition of the category «logistics integration». The author has defined the content of the category of logistics integration and the author's definition is given. The study of the evolution of logistics was carried out in conjunction with the development of information technology. The types of logistic integration are determined by the periods of logistics development and future trends are indicated.

Keywords: integration, quasi-integration; coordination; logistics; logistics integration; logistics coordination; supply chain management; digital supply network; Internet of things; digitalization.

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ЛОГИСТИЧЕСКАЯ ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ ХОЗЯЙСТВУЮЩИХ СУБЪЕКТОВ: ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЙ АСПЕКТ

В статье проведен анализ теоретических подходов к определению категории «логистическая интеграция», рассмотрена связь данной категории с другими близкими по значению экономическими категориями (интеграция, дезинтеграция, квазинтеграция, координация, централизация, кооперация, объединение, логистическая координация) и определены их сходства и различия. Раскрыто содержание данной категории и приведена авторская формулировка. Проведено исследование эволюции логистики во взаимосвязи с развитием информационных технологий. Определены виды логистической интеграции по периодам развития логистики и обозначены будущие тенденции.

Ключевые слова: интеграция; квазинтеграция; координация; логистика; логистическая интеграция; логистическая координация; управление цепью поставок; цифровая сеть поставок; интернет вещей; цифровизация.

В формирующемся глобальном цифровом информационном пространстве, где решающую роль в конкурентной борьбе играют информационные потоки и каналы обмена