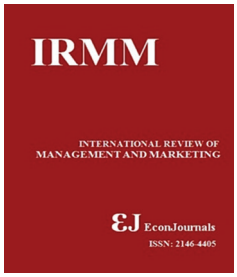

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The Antecedents and Consequences of Customer Inspiration: The Mediating Role of Perceptual Fluency in the Online Shopping Context

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ABSTRACT

Customer inspiration is gaining scholars attention in the marketing literature. Thus, the main objective of this study is to highlight on customer inspiration in the online shopping context, and this could be by examining the role of augmented reality (AR) in promoting customer inspiration. Minimal number of research have studied the effect of two critical dimensions of AR which are environmental embedding and simulated physical control on customer inspiration. Thus, this research will bridge this gap by conducting a quantitative study that empirically validates the effect of these two important variables on customer inspiration. Besides, this will open new insights for the future research to explore other variables and better understand AR. In addition, few studies have validated the theory of processing fluency in the AR context. Hence, this study will close the gap and investigate the role of perceptual fluency as a mediator to the relationship between AR and customer inspiration.

Keywords: Augmented Reality, Customer Inspiration, Online Shopping, Perceptual Fluency, Lebanon, Advocacy Intention, Decision Comfort
JEL Classifications: L81, M3

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, technological changes are rapidly transforming consumers' shopping experience in which digitalization is changing the way retailers are connected to customers (Barhorst et al., 2021). These interactive technologies and the use of e-commerce have grabbed the attention of both retailers and consumers in the past few decades (Hinsch et al., 2020). For instance, augmented reality (AR) is a new technological marketing tool which is growing at a rapid pace (Poushneh and Parraga, 2017; Rauschnabel, 2021).

AR is an "interactive technology that overlays the virtual 3D model of a commodity into the real world to modify the physical environment, where users can manipulate the 3D model by, for example, rotating, moving, and zooming in and out" (Fan et al., 2020, p. 1). AR enables consumers to have real-time interactions with products, such as trying on glasses and testing a new lipstick using an AR virtual mirror (Heller et al., 2019). In addition, customers can also try on clothes virtually without visiting a physical store by standing in front the "augmented mirror" (Erra and Colonnese, 2015). Thus, AR allows customers to form while shopping the never-before-seen digital experiences (Huang, 2021). In the current study, the researcher will consider two components of AR which are environmental embedding and stimulated physical control (Hilken et al., 2017).

Furthermore, customer inspiration is a topic of critical attention in the e-commerce industry worldwide (Kwon and Boger, 2021). The internet penetration has led customers' purchasing behavior to become unpredictable (Izogo and Mpinganjira, 2020). Moreover, several customers claim that they are dissatisfied with their online shopping experience because they can't interact with the online products (Caboni and Hagberg, 2019). This dissatisfaction could lead to customers' hate or detachment with a brand (Li and

Fang, 2019). Thus, customers will have the intention to spread a damaging word of mouth about the company (Bhati and Verma, 2020). In addition, online retailers are facing a severe problem with the range of services provided to online shoppers, where consumers can't touch or try the product before purchasing it (Fan et al., 2020). Thus, if online retailers fail in considering tools to inspire shoppers online then this will increase the risk of not being favored by the online consumer, hence lower their competitive advantage (Rauschnabel, 2021).

Online retailers are considering new ideas and solutions in their marketing activities (such as AR) to inspire customers and simulate a real experience of their products (Nikhashemi et al., 2021). However, minimal research has explored how AR in particular, environmental embedding and stimulated physical control promote customer inspiration. Furthermore, Böttger et al. (2017) also claimed that studying customer inspiration outcomes still requires more investigation. Thus, its critical to understand the process of how customer inspiration leads to positive outcomes in the online shopping context for instance, advocacy intention and decision comfort. Therefore, this study aims to fill the previously mentioned gaps in previous research by first examining how the components of AR trigger customer inspiration by studying the role of perceptual fluency as a mediating variable. Second, examining two outcomes of customer inspiration, for instance advocacy intention and decision comfort.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The foundation of the study is based on several theories that will help better explain the relationships developed in this research. The adopted theories are the following: situated cognition theory, processing theory, and regulatory engagement theory (RET). First, the situated cognition theory in marketing argues that consumers will learn more about the value of a product by linking abstracts into reality (Robbins and Aydede, 2009). In addition, Hilken et al. (2017, p. 886) used the situated cognition theory in the online AR context and proposed that "information processing occurs within (i.e., is embedded in) and actively exploits (i.e., embodies) a person's environment, rather than taking place as an abstract activity in the mind." Second, processing fluency theory refers to how easily the information is brought to mind (Sohn, 2017). Third, the RET, is referred to the psychological state of an engagement that is related to "sustained attention" (Scholer and Higgins, 2009). In line with RET theory, the current study will consider that if customers have encountered inspiration while shopping online then this will promote positive outcomes that could be associated with positive behaviors and emotions.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

3.1. The Impact of Environmental Embedding and Stimulated Physical Control on Customer Inspiration

Thrash and Elliot (2004) define inspiration as a motivational state that induces people to bring ideas into fruition. In addition, customer inspiration is an intrinsic motivation in nature which is characterized as a strong cognitive element (Böttger et al., 2017). Fan et al. (2020, p. 3) defined environmental embedding (EE) as "the visual superposition of virtual content in a person's real-world environment," and argued that EE assist shoppers in presenting the surrounding environment, in which customers will find it easy to determine whether the product is suitable to them without relying on previous experience. Hilken et al. (2017) defined simulated physical control (SPC) as practicing physical controls on online items such as rotating and moving.

Customer inspiration is achieved when marketing communications reveal new concepts and ideas (Thrash and Elliot, 2004). Moreover, previous research argued that inspiration could be evoked in situations where consumers are seeking new ideas (Thrash and Elliot, 2004; B¨ottger et al., 2017). Furthermore, the occurrence of inspiration highly depends on the existence in addition to the characteristics of an inspiring content or source (Böttger et al., 2017). Thus, prior research supported that AR components promote positive outcomes such as inspiration (Rauschnabel et al., 2019; Nikhashemi et al., 2021). For instance, Rauschnabel et al. (2019) investigated empirically the antecedents and consequences of customer inspiration by using a framework grounded by perceptual fluency. The study which was applied in Germany showed that augmentation quality, utilitarian and hedonic benefits promote customer inspiration which in turn will lead to changes in brand attitude. Furthermore, Rauschnabel et al. (2019) claimed that AR through it components draws online shoppers into a fantasy world in which it will increase customer inspiration. Moreover, through AR online shoppers are able to visualize new ideas and this will lead to higher levels of customer inspiration (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). In addition, Nikhashemi et al. (2021) research that was applied on Malaysian customers showed that the hedonic and utilitarian benefits coming from AR attributes (novelty, interactivity, quality, and vividness) in online shopping applications promote positively customer inspiration and engagement. However, prior research (e.g. Hinsch et al., 2020) also argued that it is difficult to achieve inspiration without a minimum level of realism. Therefore, AR through its components (EE and SPC) provides online customers with a realistic experience by visualizing a new reality. Based on the previous literature, the following is hypothesized:

H1: Environmental embedding has a positive impact on customer inspiration in the online shopping context.

H2: Simulated physical control has a positive impact on customer inspiration in the online shopping context.

3.2. The Mediating Role of Perceptual Fluency

Perceptual fluency was defined by Lee and Labroo (2004, p.152) as "the ease with which a person perceives and identifies the physical characteristics of a stimulus." Perceptual fluency is identified to be improved by preceding exposures (Jacoby and Dallas 1981). In addition, according to Reber et al. (2004), perceptual fluency is triggered by factors such as visual clarity, presentation quality, the quality of images, and figure-ground contrast. However, the lack of consumer's ability to develop a visual mental picture can make consumers uncomfortable with their choice of products (e.g. furniture) and might even withdraw from doing a purchase (Im and Ha, 2011). Nevertheless, AR unique aspects in the e-tailing context gives the potential to "offload" online shoppers' mental

imagery processing while choosing products and making decisions (Heller et al., 2019). Where producing a 3D digital demonstration of shopping items, and embedding and converting them in a use context, are main aspects of AR (Fan et al., 2020). Furthermore, prior research argued that AR has the ability to facilitate and supplement the mental processing of complex decision-making, thus, leading consumer to have more comfortable choices (Heller et al., 2021).

Perceptual fluency plays an important role in sending affective signals that are used to impact motivation (Hinsch et al., 2020). In addition, without an adequate level of realism (such as interacting with the items), consumers will have difficulty to be inspired as they will not perceive that items as relevant or suitable to their consumption goals (Böttger et al., 2017). Even though fluency's motivational consequences have received minimal attention from prior scholars (Hinsch et al., 2020), but previous research claimed that any factor that simplifies a fluent processing will result in an increased motivation of liking even under conditions of a single exposure (Reber et al., 2004). Moreover, prior studies (e.g. Thrash and Elliot, 2004) stated that inspiration occurs when there is a little cognitive effort, and higher levels of processing ease are more likely to promote higher levels of customer inspiration. Therefore, based on previous literature, the following is hypothesized:

H3: Perceptual fluency mediates the relationship between Environmental embedding and customer inspiration in the online shopping context.

H4: Perceptual fluency mediates the relationship between stimulated physical control and customer inspiration in the online shopping context.

3.3. The Relationship between Customer Inspiration and Advocacy Intention

Kim et al. (2010) described advocacy as a supporting behavior in which customers undertake to reinforce a brand. Abdelkader et al. (2020) constructed a conceptual framework to examine the factors that influence brand advocacy. The results showed that brand experience, brand image, brand identification, self-brand connection and emotional brand attachment are factors that influence positively brand advocacy. Moreover, Izogo and Mpinganjira (2020) showed that customer engagement behaviors are consequences of customer inspiration. They considered in their study that feedback intention, self-expression and seeking assistance are customer engagement behaviors which are influenced positively by customer inspiration. Furthermore, Sheng et al. (2020) showed that customer inspiration affects positively consumers' behavior such as purchase intention. In addition, Arghashi and Yuksel (2021) applied the theory regulatory engagement and showed that inspiration promotes consumers' behavior in a particular engagement. In line with Hinsch et al. (2020) future research call to examine customer inspiration impact on advocacy, therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H5: Customer inspiration has a positive impact on advocacy intention in the online shopping context.

3.4. The Relationship between Customer Inspiration and Decision Comfort

Hwang et al. (2018) described decision comfort as the level of easiness that customers feel concerning a particular decision related to a product or brand. Prior studies claimed that consumers do not look only for experiential benefits while shopping online but also they expect a reduced decision uncertainty (Dacko, 2017).

Hilken et al. (2017) study adopted the situated cognition theory and showed that simulated physical control and environmental embedding both influence positively decision comfort. In addition, Khan and Ghouri (2018) research showed that customer inspiration consequences involve customer satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, Pfrang et al. (2014) research examined the consequences of customer inspiration but in the fashion retailing context, and their findings revealed that inspiration affects consumers' emotions positively. However, Parker et al. (2016) argued that consumers' decision comfort is triggered by emotion-laden signs. Furthermore, previous research such as Hinsch et al. (2020) claimed that customer inspiration is an emotion laden which has a positive valence. Therefore, based on the previous literature, the following is hypothesized:

H6: Customer inspiration has a positive impact on decision comfort in the online shopping context.

3.5. Research Framework

Based on Böttger et al. (2017) model and the prior literature regarding the relationships between the research constructs; the conceptual framework is developed as shown below (Figure 1).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Population and Sampling

As for the current study, the population involves customers living in Lebanon, who's ages are above 16 years, and they are familiar with online shopping using AR. Based on UN (2019), 75.91% of the Lebanese population fulfill the current research chosen range of population age which encompasses around 5,200,000 people. Also, based on Statista (2021), 71% of the Lebanese customers have used online shopping during COVID-19, thus, 3,692,000 is as approximate number to be considered for the study's population.

Moreover, Following Calculator.net (2021), the following formula is used to determine an approximate sample size for data collection $N = z^2 \times \hat{p}\,(1-\hat{p})/\varepsilon^2$. Thus, the suggested sample size (n) is: $n = 3.84*0.71(1–0.71)/(0.05^2) = 316$. Therefore, the study's sample size should be above 316 persons. The study undertook the quantitative approach to examine the relationships between the chosen variables in the study's framework. The sampling technique used is the judgmental sampling. Finally, after several follow ups, 415 respondents completed the questionnaire, thus, these will be used for data analysis. The respondents demographic profile is exhibited in the following Table 1.

4.2. Measures

Customer inspiration was measured using 8 items adopted from Böttger et al. (2017) scale. Environmental embedding was inspected using 3 items adopted from Huang (2021). Moreover, simulated physical control was inspected using 3 items from Huang (2021) scale. Perceptual fluency was inspected through 4 items adopted from Im and Ha (2011) scale. Advocacy intention was measured by 3 items from Fullerton (2005) scale. Finally,

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

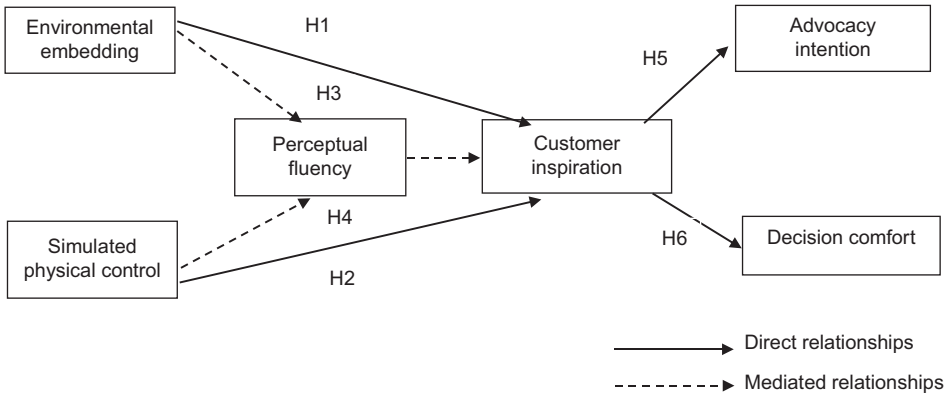

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)		
17 to<22	101	24.5
22 to<30	197	47.5
30 to<40	72	17.3
40 to<50	33	7.9
50 to<60	9	2.1
60 and above	3	0.7
Total	415	100
Gender		
Female	246	59.3
Male	169	40.7
Total	415	100
Education level		
Primary	0	0
High school	40	9.7
Bachelor degree	290	69.8
MBA/Master degree	69	16.7
PhD/DBA degree	16	3.8
Total	415	100
Income per month ($)		
>50	50	12
50 to<100	33	8
100 to<200	66	15.9
200 to<400	77	18.6
400 to<700	72	17.3
700 to<1000	48	11.6
1000 and above	69	16.6
Total	415	100
Marital status		
Single	200	48.2
Married	211	50.9
Divorced	4	0.9
Others	0	0
Total	415	100

*Each 1 USD equals to 25000 Lebanese Lira at the time of the data collection for the survey

Table 2: Constructs, scale items, and descriptive statistics

Constructs and scale items	Item Mean (S.D)	Factor loading	Cronbach alpha	AVE	CR
Customer inspiration			0.95	0.70	0.88
CI1	4.14 (1.02)	0.73			
CI2	4.10 (0.84)	0.74			
CI3	4.15 (0.99)	0.71			
CI4	4.10 (1.02)	0.68			
CI5	3.95 (1.09)	0.85			
CI6	3.93 (1.02)	0.84			
CI7	3.89 (1.04)	0.84			
CI8	4.05 (1.04)	0.80			
Environmental embedding			0.90	0.85	0.74
EE1	3.82 (0.86)	0.81			
EE2	3.97 (0.94)	0.85			
EE3	3.87 (1.02)	0.86			
Stimulated physical control			0.87	0.75	0.75
SPC1	3.99 (0.99)	0.67			
SPC2	3.84 (1.11)	0.79			
SPC3	3.86 (1.07)	0.75			
Perceptual fluency			0.92	0.90	0.75
PF1	3.85 (1.07)	0.92			
PF2	3.99 (0.95)	0.88			
PF3	3.83 (0.98)	0.88			
Advocacy intention			0.84	0.71	0.79
AD1	3.83 (0.98)	0.72			
AD2	3.90 (0.98)	0.79			
AD3	3.95 (1.09)	0.78			
AD4	3.56 (1.10)	0.83			
Decision comfort			0.75	0.80	0.79
D1	3.87 (0.86)	0.70			
D2	3.91 (0.90)	0.86			
D3	3.93 (0.92)	0.69			
D4	3.93 (1.24)	0.62			

CI: Customer inspiration, EE: Environmental embedding, SPC: Simulated physical control, PF: Perceptual fluency, AD: Advocacy intention, DC: Decision comfort

decision comfort is measured by 4 items obtained from Hilken et al. (2017) scale.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

5.1. Reliability and Validity

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted by utilizing AMOS 24 software (Table 2). The Chi-square (χ^2) was significant ($\chi^2_{(267)}$ = 4568.551 at P = 0.000) and CFA results were also satisfactory (CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.96, and NFI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.045). Additionally, the values of Cronbach's alpha was satisfactory for all variables, between 0.75 and 0.95 (Nunally, 1978). In addition, evaluating scale's construct validity was inspected through conducting convergent and discriminant forms of validity. The estimates of the factor loadings of all scale items exceeded 0.6 as claimed by Chin et al. (1997). The AVE (The

Average Variance Extracted) was between 0.70 and 0.90 for the constructs, thus higher than the benchmark of 0.5 as commended by Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Moreover, to test discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE values was contrasted with the corresponding correlation of each factor. Table 3 displays the square roots of AVE surpass the correlation values of every variable, hence, assuring discriminant validity (Chin et al., 1997).

5.2. Hypotheses Testing

First, the association between environmental embedding and customer inspiration displayed a positive relationship ($\beta = 0.77$, $p < 0.000$), supporting H1. The outcomes also displayed a positive effect between simulated physical control and customer inspiration ($\beta = 1.47$, $p < 0.000$), supporting H2. Second, following Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach, mediation analysis was utilized including the four-step approach. The first step involves testing EE and Customer satisfaction (M1), a significant association was shown ($\beta = 0.77$, $p < 0.000$). However, M2 displays a significant relationship between EE and perceptual fluency ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.000$), and then customer inspiration and perceptual fluency association was also significant (M3, $\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.000$), but once the mediator (perceptual fluency) was entered to the model, EE was still significant as displayed in M4 ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$), thus, achieving a partial mediation and supporting H3. Furthermore, the outcomes revealed that the relationship between SPC and perceptual fluency is significant (M5, $\beta = 0.75$, $p < 0.01$), and customer inspiration is significantly associated with perceptual fluency (M6, $\beta = 0.60$, $p < 0.00$), however, the findings showed that introducing the mediator (perceptual fluency) to SPC and customer inspiration relationship brought a significant relationship as shown in M7 ($\beta = 0.66$, $p < 0.01$) showing a mediation but also partial, hence supporting H4.

Furthermore, a significant positive impact was shown between customer inspiration and advocacy intention ($\beta = 0.65$, $p < 0.000$), supporting H5. Finally, the outcomes supported the positive relationship between customer inspiration and decision comfort ($\beta = 0.79$, $p < 0.000$), thus H6 is supported. Tables 4 and 5 display the results.

Table 3: Correlation matrix and square roots of AVE

	CI	EE	SPC	PF	AD	DC
CI	**0.83**					
EE	0.774	**0.92**				
SPC	0.757	0.803**	**0.86**			
PF	0.554	0.387**	0.601**	**0.94**		
AD	0.558	0.455**	0.625**	0.599**	**0.89**	
DC	0.477	0.368**	0.532**	0.580**	0.562**	**0.84**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. On the diagonal appear the square roots of AVE in boldface

Table 4: Direct relationships

Hypotheses	Paths	p	β	Result
H1	CI < — EE	***	0.77	Supported
H2	CI < — SPC	***	1.47	Supported
H5	AD < — CI	***	0.65	Supported
H6	DC < — CI	***	0.79	Supported

***p<0.001

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigates the role of AR in promoting customer inspiration in the online shopping context. Moreover, the study examines the mediating role of perceptual fluency. and it explores the outcomes of customer inspiration. First, the results of the study revealed a positive relationship between the two components of AR and customer inspiration. Where there is a direct positive relationship between environmental embedding and customer inspiration, supporting H1. In addition, there is a direct positive relationship between stimulated physical control and customer inspiration, supporting H2. Thus, online shopping stores that integrate AR technology will have the opportunity to give customer a real-life shopping experience as if they are shopping in a real store. Furthermore, AR through EE and SPC will allow customers not only to try on products (e.g. an outfit) but also to move and view products in different dimensions, thus this new marketing technology will create and trigger customers' motivation and sense of inspiration to buy the product. Nevertheless, these finding are in line with prior studies such as Nikhashemi et al. (2021).

Second, the findings also revealed that perceptual fluency mediates (partially) both the relationship between environmental embedding and customer inspiration, supporting H3, in addition to the relationship between stimulated physical control and customer inspiration, supporting H4. These results are in parallel with previous literature such as Thrash and Elliot (2003) and Hinsch et al. (2020). Hence, the findings reveal that AR through environmental embedding and stimulated physical control promote customer inspiration through enhancing perceptual fluency. This means that AR simplifies a fluent processing where customers will be more likely to understand if the product fits with their preferences, and will be able to get supplementary information

Table 5: Mediating hypothesis

	CI	EE	CI	CI	CI	SPC	CI
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Independent variable (s)							
EE	0.77*** (0.029)			0.65** (0.65)			
PF		0.38*** (0.047)	0.55*** (0.03712)			0.60*** (0.037)	
SPC					0.75** (0.027)		0.66** (0.033)
Mediating variable							
PF				0.29*** (0.027)			0.15** (0.035)

Figures in parentheses are standard errors. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

on it, therefore resulting in an increased motivation of liking or increased inspiration to buy a product.

Third, the current study investigates advocacy intention as a behavioral outcome of customer inspiration. The results showed that there is a direct positive association between customer inspiration and advocacy intention, supporting H5. The research findings are consistent with Böttger et al. (2017) who argued that customer inspiration leads to behavioral intentions for instance advocacy intention. Hence, this reveals that online stores who are using AR will have the opportunity to enhance their reputation and promote a positive word-of-mouth, in which customers who were inspired by the technology (AR) to buy the product will recommend this online store to others.

Fourth, the study also examines an emotional outcome of customer inspiration, for instance, decision comfort. The finding showed that there is a direct positive relationship between customer inspiration and decision comfort, supporting H6. The results are consistent with Pfrang et al. (2014) who showed that customer inspiration prompts customers' emotions. The results reveals that online shoppers who are inspired through AR while buying online products are more likely to feel comfortable while taking a decision regarding a specific product. Furthermore, the high level of inspiration will stimulate the feeling of comfort and positive sentiments in online consumers towards brands utilizing AR.

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research contributes to the customer inspiration and AR marketing literature through illustrating the role of the two components of AR which are environmental embedding and stimulated physical control in promoting customer inspiration. The research conceptual framework contributes to the marketing research where it utilizes the social cognitive theory and the processing theory to shed the light on how AR promotes customer inspiration. In addition to utilizing RET theory to examine customer inspiration outcomes.

Furthermore, this research is important from the practical side about customer inspiration especially in the online shopping context after this new trend in AR. The study's results will inform marketing managers about the major role of enhancing customer inspiration as it will help online stores differentiate themselves from competitors. The current research will educate online stores marketing managers about the importance of integrating and utilizing the AR concept in their websites as this will save them in the long run, as their customers' decision comfort and advocacy intention will increase. In addition, nowadays companies are beginning to adopt AR technology as a new tool to enhance their future businesses, thus this study will guide marketing managers by highlighting on new ways to develop and design online platforms by utilizing AR in order to inspire customers and make them feel comfortable in their purchase decision.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

The current study incorporates several limitations that could impact its outcomes generalization. First, this research was conducted in the time of pandemic (COVID-19), thus this could affect consumers' attitudes towards AR and online shopping as they were obliged to shift their activities online. Second, this study used the cross-sectional approach, however, it's important to inspect these relationships overtime, thus future studies could employ the longitudinal approach. Third, the study just focused on particular outcomes of customer inspiration, thus future studies could examine other positive outcomes such as customer satisfaction and loyalty. Finally, it would be interesting for future studies to examine the dark side of AR in the marketing field.

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