

## Exploring the Impact of Demographic Variables on the Relationship between Social Distancing and Patronage Intention in In-store Retails during Two Pandemic Periods in Libya

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study explored the mediating impact of demographic variables on the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention in retail stores during two pandemic periods in Libya, utilizing a specific framework model.

### Design/Methodology/Approach:

Data was collected using a quantitative approach, employing a combination of E-questionnaires and

distributed questionnaires. Probability sampling, a fundamental random sampling technique, was used, with a sample size of 250 eligible responses from retail stores in Libya. Descriptive correlation and regression analyses were conducted to examine the mediating impact of demographic variables on the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention in these retail stores during the two

pandemic periods was analysed by Spss.

**Findings:** The study revealed a significant relationship between social distancing and patronage intention, as well as, shown that demographics do not mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention.

**Originality/Value:** This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Libyan consumer behavior and identifies gaps in the existing literature related to social distancing and safety measures aimed at attracting more customers to retail stores during health crises in Libya. This means, the result can be used to promote marketing strategies to face any crisis. Also, it stands as one of the few studies designed to comprehend the patronage behavior of Libyan consumers in retail stores.

**Keywords:** social distancing, Libyan consumer behaviour, COVID-19, patronage intention, retail stores, libya marketing, Libyan health crisis.

#### \* Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak was a significant issue for all industries as the virus spread through many countries and territories. In the initial three months of the COVID-19 pandemic, a greater number of jobs were lost compared to the present period. As reported by

Gupta et al. in 2020, has raised concerns with the World Health Organization (WHO) regarding the factors driving this accelerated economic crisis across different sectors. Authorities focused on implementing measures the WHO recommended to control human and social behavior (Pedersen & Favero 2020). One of the key measures was social distancing, which effectively disrupted the chain of disease transmission. These social distancing measures substantially impacted various aspects, directly or indirectly affecting the economic output, market share, and activities of businesses in the global market (Pedersen & Favero 2020).

Consequently, some companies struggled to carry out their tasks, while others found opportunities to adapt and control their operations (Pathak & Warpade 2020). The pandemic also had a profound effect on consumer behavior worldwide, with restrictions and lockdowns on social gatherings and movements prompting consumers to adopt new ways of purchasing and consuming products and services. Moreover, it led to a significant shift in consumer behavior towards e-commerce platforms, as people were compelled to stay home and turned to online channels for

essential products and services. In physical retail stores, the number of customers visiting supermarkets and shops decreased (Wang, Yao & Martin 2021). Many consumers chose to shop online to avoid crowded areas, although this transition to online shopping was only feasible for some individuals (Rossetti, Yoon & Daziano 2021).

Libya was affected by COVID-19 in 2020, and developments from the Public Health Office (PHO) and the Center for Diseases and Epidemics showed the cases infected with COVID-19 announced "351.756" cases reported in October 2021 (National Centre for Disease Control – Libya 2021). Hence, the Libyan Government is actively implementing precautionary measures recommended by the WHO. This is aimed at ensuring that consumers can fulfil their daily needs while also safeguarding against the virus's transmission. These efforts promote a form of coexistence that prioritizes protection, reducing the risk of exposure to the epidemic. On the other hand, the daily life of the Libyan consumer has been affected by COVID-19. The epidemic is impacting all businesses and sectors across the country, and proactive measures have been implemented to address predicted risks. Notably, in

Libyan retail stores, customers have expressed dissatisfaction and concerns about potential exposure to the epidemic, as documented by (Bouthahab and Khaled , 2020).

Certainly, gaining an understanding of the shifts in the business landscape brought about by the global pandemic is vital. There is a time limit and a limited number of individuals allowed to enter the department store, mall, grocery shops and general stores. The primary concern is no longer providing high-quality products and services at affordable prices. (National Centre for Disease Control – Libya 2021). Instead, it centres on retaining existing customers who can significantly contribute to long-term sustainability. The principal obstacle for marketers during this epidemic lies in selecting the most appropriate strategies that align with the current scenario, particularly for the challenges faced by marketers in Libyan retail stores, where the objective is to attract enough customers to meet their demands while offering suitable solutions, as highlighted by (Bouthahab and Khaled in 2020).

COVID-19 has brought about unprecedented transformations in consumer behavior, particularly in in-store retail (Chandola &

Shendurnikar 2023). The implementation of social distancing measures has highlighted the need for customers to reevaluate their purchasing behavior, thereby influencing their patronage intentions and related factors. This study aims to establish social distancing as a general model for studying its impact on the Libyan market and the various challenges that businesses and individuals face in marketing, particularly within retail stores during two pandemic periods. The researchers are examining the impact of the pandemic on overall consumer behavior, specifically in terms of in-store actions and intentions to patronize, emphasizing aspects such as crowd dynamics and measures related to social distancing. This exploratory study employs demographics as a mediating factor between social distancing and patronage intentions in stores during two pandemic periods to categorize consumers based on their retail preferences. While a limited number of studies have explored empirical research on social distancing and patronage intentions, particularly in the grocery segments of the US, China, and India, this paper offers a unique perspective on Libya. Furthermore, this study contributes to a better understanding of Libyan

consumer behavior during two pandemic periods, especially given the limited research conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak (Thilagavathi et al. 2021; Rossetti, Yoon & Daziano 2021; Briedis et al. 2020; Gerhold 2020), particularly in the health sector. There is still a scarcity of research addressing the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions in retail stores.

#### \* **Literature review**

#### \* **Social Distancing**

The WHO defines social distancing as a set of preventive measures aimed at reducing contact between healthy, sick, or contagious individuals to curb the spread of diseases (WHO 2020). Social distancing is a strategy that primarily involves reducing physical interactions (Alkhatib 2020). Furthermore, the WHO has recommended a range of precautionary measures, including the closure of schools, markets, and government sectors, which have been identified as a safe approach to protecting the health and well-being of individuals and society at large (Muhumoud & Al-Zahra 2020).

The perceived value of shopping can change in the context of social distancing, especially when it comes to shopping preferences. In the past, with easy access to malls and

restaurants, shopping outings were often seen as enjoyable experiences that provided a high level of hedonic pleasure. However, with reduced access to these pleasurable purchases due to social distancing measures, consumers may now turn to convenience products available at neighborhood stores to fulfill their need for distraction and entertainment. These products may serve as a substitute for purchases that were previously associated with a higher level of hedonic value (Moll Brandão et al. 2023).

Organizations and stores have limited the number of shoppers and shopping hours to enter the store based on their store size to maintain social distancing (Ntounis et al. 2020). This study suggests that complex insights into shopping experience values are associated with lower perceptions of spatial crowding. Additionally, the level of ineffectiveness in the store setting is known to generate greater perceptions of contamination (Gupta & Coskun 2021), increasing the perceived risk of the virus and leaving individuals feeling anxious. Moreover, the social distance between customers in a store is crucial in ensuring consumer safety (Pantano et al. 2021). If this is not adequately maintained, consumers

may experience a decrease in hedonic value. Furthermore, as neighborhood tenants may sometimes prioritize a well-planned servicescape due to financial constraints, there is a greater likelihood of a lack of control over the purchasing situation, leading to discomfort, stress, and restricted mobility. Thus, when spatial density is high, purchases made for the leisure and pleasure of the store visit experience may become hazardous.

According to Jean-Noël, Basile and Julien (2020), social distancing leads to reduced employment across all industries, resulting in a decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Many organizations find themselves in a situation where their input costs exceed their gross output, resulting in a negative value-added. These businesses are not only unable to cover their operational costs but must also pay transfer fees, service debts, and taxes on their products and services. Governmental institutions play a significant role in influencing economic growth (Hevia & Neumeyer 2020). Health regulations have also heightened retail customers' fears (Pathak & Warpade 2020). Many retail researchers emphasize that social distancing is one of the essential measures for protecting against the pandemic and

breaking the chain of disease transmission (Briedis et al. 2020).

An article by Gupta et al. (2020) identified the impact of social distancing policies implemented between March and April 2020 in response to the pandemic. These policies reduced the mortality rate and the number of new COVID-19 cases but also raised concerns about the financial burdens on both employees and businesses. Furthermore, research by Alkhatib (2020) examined Jordan's government's efforts to control COVID-19. The government successfully employed social marketing and effective leadership to promote social distancing, which was widely accepted by the population. Additional policies were implemented to enhance the effectiveness of social distancing, and social marketing played a crucial role in increasing public awareness about COVID-19. In financial terms, the government provided income support for all workers, reduced discounts, and collaborated with banks to provide relief on loans until the recession subsided.

In retail stores, consumers have reduced the time they spend visiting supermarkets and stores, resulting in shorter shopping trips compared to their pre-pandemic

habits (Wang, Yao & Martin 2021). Some customers have turned to online shopping to avoid crowded areas, but it is not a practical option for many. Researchers sought to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on consumers' grocery store choices, especially in the context of crowds and social distancing measures, which have reshaped consumer behavior during the pandemic (Rossetti, Yoon & Daziano 2021). Similarly, a study by Shamshiripour et al. (2020) highlighted that the primary advantage of online shopping is the avoidance of crowds. In a similar vein, Chenarides et al. (2021) noted that consumers expressed concerns about COVID-19 and a heightened sense of risk as the primary reasons for preferring online shopping over in-store pickup to avoid crowded spaces.

Another literature review (Bouthahb & Khaled 2020) investigated consumer behavior in Libya in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of safety measures such as social distancing. This study explored the relationship between customer retention and social distancing, examining potential differences based on age, education, and income levels among customers. The

findings revealed that, since the onset of the pandemic, customers in Libya have adhered to social distancing regulations as a crucial measure to prevent the virus, with a significant correlation between social distancing and customer retention. There were notable differences in how customers viewed social distancing based on their educational background, age, and income levels. The perception of customer retention also varied among different segments of Libya's population, depending on age and education.

However, it's worth noting that there is still a lack of comprehensive studies on the impacts of social distancing on customer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, and limited published data are available, particularly in retail contexts. This study was designed based on a review of existing literature, and it employs a clear, systematic, and reliable concept of social distancing established by the WHO.

#### **\* Demographics in Retail Stores**

Demographics have assumed a central role in marketing studies, with various approaches suggesting that demographic variables are not the sole factors influencing consumer behavior. The initial exploration of demographic variables can be traced back to Schwartz's study in 1962, as cited by McCullough in 1974.

Multiple studies have underscored the significance of consumer characteristics derived from demographic data for market segmentation. In the early 1990s, Harrison (1994) advocated for the greater utilization of psychographic characteristics and other factors in understanding customer behavior. For instance, in the realm of retail stores, Adibfar et al. (2022) pointed out that shoppers in department stores exhibit a distinct demographic profile, including factors like age, education, and household size when compared to those who do not patronize such establishments. Additionally, Zhong and Moon (2020) discovered that gender and age play substantial roles in customers' store choices. Conversely, Jiao and Azimian (2021) reported a strong correlation between store selection and age, household income, family size, travel distance to the store, as well as gender, education, and occupation.

Customer behavior, expectations, and attitudes significantly influence purchase intent, as evidenced by (Ali et al. in 2023; Chu & Chen 2019). Assessing customers' purchasing behavior is crucial in product evaluation, with the decision to buy often swayed by factors such as demand and perceived

quality and value. Customers are thus subject to internal and external influences throughout the purchase process, as noted by Xu in 2020. Numerous studies have affirmed the impact of demographic characteristics on purchasing intentions at various levels. For instance, Wang, Wong and Narayanan (2020) confirmed the influence of age on purchase intentions.

Another demographic factor that has been examined is the influence of gender on customer purchasing behavior in relation to product categories (Zia & Kalia 2023). Gender has been identified as a significant factor in shaping consumer attitudes toward social distancing. Studies have shown that women tend to have a more positive attitude toward social distancing compared to men. For example, Hesham, Riadh and Sihem (2021) found that women were more anxious and took greater precautions to avoid contamination, and older individuals were more concerned about COVID-19 than younger ones. Moreover, shopping experiences and purchase intentions have led to an increased demand for healthy foods as opposed to other products. Females generally exhibit greater concern regarding the health consequences of the pandemic

compared to males (Meyer 2020; Krakowiak 2021).

Females were significantly less likely than males to shop at traditional markets, but they spent more money in supermarkets due to their less frequent visits. Traditional markets emphasize freshness and social acceptability more than supermarkets. Further evidence demonstrates the crucial role that shoppers' demographics play in influencing their store choices, purchase decisions, and patronage intentions (shopping behavior). On the other hand, Hou (2020) has made several attempts to discuss the frequent influence of demographics on online shopping, except for gender, which does not often affect online shopping. According to the study, crisis perceptions may vary based on demographic characteristics, and consumer behavior can change. Older individuals are less concerned about COVID-19 than younger ones, and men are less concerned about COVID-19 than women. These studies undeniably highlight the significance of demographics in consumer retail stores. However, it is essential to consider the interaction of other variables to gain a more comprehensive understanding of consumption dynamics, a fact long

recognized by retailers. In this study, during the COVID-19 pandemic, demographic factors of Libyan customers were utilized as a mediating variable that could affect social distancing and patronage intentions.

Finally, income emerged as another significant factor in determining consumer attitudes toward social distancing. Low-income individuals are less likely to engage in social distancing due to financial constraints, including working in an environment where in-person networking is essential or needing more money for delivery fees (OECD 2020). In contrast, high-earning individuals are more inclined to adhere to social distancing measures as they can afford delivery charges to maintain safety (Papageorge et al. 2021). Therefore, income significantly impacts social distancing and concurrently influences purchasing intentions.

#### **\* Patronage Intentions**

Consumer behavior is a significant concern for retailers seeking to target the right customers and utilize retail marketing strategies effectively to reach customers who make purchases (Mishra, Singh & Koles 2021). Numerous academic studies emphasize the importance of consumer patronage intentions and

behavior in achieving growth and profitability in retailing. The dependent or outcome variable frequently examined is patronage intention (Adeyinka & Ngoaketsi 2022). In order to target the right customers and run successful retail marketing campaigns, businesses must have an in-depth knowledge of retail patronage (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). The Theory of Planned behavior (TPB) and the Theory of Reasoned Behavior (TRA) were formulated by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) with the aim of explaining the relationship between attitude and behavior. Subsequently, those concepts have been employed to describe and estimate a diverse array of consuming behaviors (Miller & Howell, 2005). The research conducted by Ang et al. (2021) employed the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to examine the factors affecting individuals' willingness to engage in social distancing practice. The findings indicate that risk-taking attitude, authoritarianism, and subjective norm significantly influence individuals' intention and behavior towards social distance.

Many researchers have explored the factors that influence decision-making behavior, intention, satisfaction, loyalty, and customer patronage across various types of

retail stores, considering numerous variables (Kusumawati et al. 2020; Liu, Tse & He 2022; Mishra, Singh & Koles 2021), as well as attitudes and confidence levels to understand their impact on purchase intention.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on consumer intentions and behavior, including shopping patterns and interactions with stores. Additionally, preventive measures, such as social distancing, have influenced customer behavior and perceptions regarding in-store experiences, leading to a decline in store patronage intentions. Several studies have investigated the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention, which has been found to vary among different demographic groups.

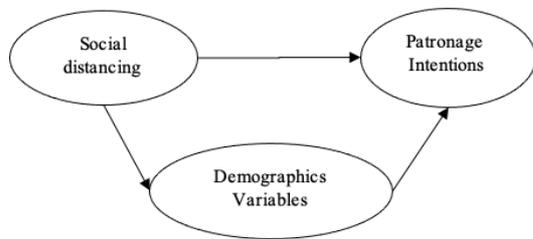
Convenience stores have been known to enhance consumer satisfaction and patronage intention due to their quality service (Syah & Olivia 2022). Many studies have reported significant changes in consumer behavior driven by the global impact of COVID-19 (Maryati 2020; Prasad 2023, Ang,etal.2021). For example, many businesses have implemented precautions to mitigate increased risks since consumers are avoiding in-store shopping. The impact of social distancing varies with age groups. Older individuals

are more likely to distance themselves from crowded areas and adhere to safety measures, while the younger population tends to be more willing to visit physical stores. This is because older people face a higher risk of contracting infectious diseases, which leads them to take more cautious measures during in-store shopping (Al-Dmour et al. 2021).

As highlighted by Gogoi (2021), consumers are now placing greater emphasis on the products they purchase, with a shift towards prioritizing quality and safety over brand names, though brands still hold importance. Many consumers are increasingly concerned about their health and the well-being of their families. The pandemic has brought about changes in consumption habits due to the constraints on accessing healthcare facilities. People cannot afford to fall ill as easily as they could in the past.

In a study conducted by Bhat, Islam and Sheikh (2021), the impact of demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and income on the intention to purchase products online was investigated. The research methodology involved administering a questionnaire to gather responses from 234 participants from the states of Jammu and Kashmir. A quota

sampling technique was employed to select participants with prior experience and knowledge of online shopping. The study's findings revealed significant differences in consumers' perceptions based on their gender and age, particularly regarding their intention to purchase products online. The research indicated that young, unmarried males tend to show a stronger inclination towards online shopping compared to older, married females.



**Figure 2. 1: Conceptual Framework**

**\* Methodology**

Sekaran and Bougie (2013) define descriptive research as a research approach conducted through systematically collected data. In this study, descriptive research was employed to investigate the hypotheses mentioned below. The research instrument used was adapted from the original work of Pedersen and Favero (2020) and tailored to the Libyan context by Bouthahab and Khaled (2020), incorporating social distancing and demographic variables. The scale and elements related to the intention to patronize were borrowed from previous studies

conducted by Jones and Reynold (2006) as well as Grace and Ocase (2005). The research methodology for the present study adopted a positivist philosophy since it is based on factual knowledge obtained through measurement. Furthermore, it employed a deductive research approach to conduct the study because the evidence was drawn from previous studies or literature, and the hypotheses were formulated based on their findings.

The study utilized a quantitative research strategy with questionnaires as the research instrument. Primary data was collected from the respondents, and the questionnaires, prepared on Google Docs in both English and Arabic for respondents' convenience, were distributed. These questionnaires were then distributed among the participants, and responses were collected through both online and offline modes. Online distribution channels included social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, while offline questionnaires were distributed directly by store retailers. Probability sampling, a fundamental random sampling approach, was employed in this study, with the sample size set at 250 eligible responses from Libyan retail consumers. However, it garnered

only 224 responses from the participants.

Reliability analysis was conducted to assess the instrument's reliability using Cronbach's Alpha. Cronbach's Alpha values were determined based on the responses from approximately 22 participants, indicating the instrument's internal consistency (questionnaire). The questionnaire used in the research consisted of three sections. The first section contained questions about the participant's demographic information, the second section addressed the social-distancing scale, and the final section focused on the patronage intention scale. A Likert five-point scale was utilized in both scales (1-Strongly Disagree / 5-Strongly Agree). The Arabic version of the social distancing scale was used, and reliability and validity analyses were conducted (Bouthahab & Khaled 2020). The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for all variable scales was found to be 0.862, indicating a high level of reliability. The social-distancing scale showed a reliability of 0.782, while the patronage intention scale had a reliability coefficient of 0.885, indicating a high level of reliability. An external examiner with expertise in this research subject made the necessary adjustments after the pilot

study, ensuring the use of a valid instrument.

Variables	Numbers of items	Cronbach's alpha
Social distancing	16	.782
Patronage to intention	6	.885
Overall	32	.862

*Table 3.1: Reliability Test Result*

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 23). Additionally, the data analysis included demographic analysis, correlation analysis, and regression analysis for thorough examination.

### \* Hypotheses

**H1:** Libyan customers have patronage intentions in retail stores in Libya during two periods of the pandemic.

**H2:** There is a significant positive relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions in-store retail in Libya during two periods of the pandemic.

**H3:** Demographics variables will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions in-store retail in Libya during two periods of the pandemic.

**H3a:** Gender will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions in-store retail in Libya during two periods of the pandemic.

**H3b:** Age will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions

in-store retail in Libya during two periods of the pandemic.

**H3c:** Socio-economic factors ( income- education- Occupation) will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions in-store retail in Libya during two periods of the pandemic.

**H3d:** Marital status will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions in-store retail in Libya during two periods of the pandemic.

**\* Data Analysis**

**\* Demographic Analysis**

Demographic analysis in this study is conducted based on respondents' age, gender, education level, occupation, number of family members, marital status, duration of maintaining social distance, and income. A total of 244 responses were collected from the 250 respondents. **Table 4.1** below presents the demographic results of the study.

**Table 4. 1: Respondents' Demographic Results**

Items	Frequency	%Age
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	100	44.6
Female	124	55.4
<b>Age</b>		
less than 20 years old	10	4.5
20- less than 40 years old	115	51.3
40-less than 60 years old	95	42.4
Over 60 years old	4	1.8
<b>Education level</b>		
Undergraduate	26	11.6
Graduate	86	38.4
Postgraduate	112	50
<b>Occupation</b>		
Employers	140	62.5
Other occupation	46	20.5
Students	13	5.8
Business -Work	13	5.8
Retired	12	5.4
<b>The Numbers of Family</b>		
Had not family	29	12.9
1-2	39	17.4
3-4	52	23.2
Above of 5	103	46
<b>The Marital Status</b>		
Singles	25	11.2
Married	181	80.8
Divorced	10	4.5
Widower	8	3.6
<b>Income</b>		
Not salary	11	4.9
450 - 1000 Dinars	65	29
1000 - 2000 Dinars	67	29.9
2000 - 3000 Dinars	67	29.9
Over 3000 Dinars	14	6.3
<b>The period of maintaining social distancing</b>		
A week	24	10.7
Two weeks	77	34.4
Three weeks	75	33.5
Above month	48	21.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>100</b>

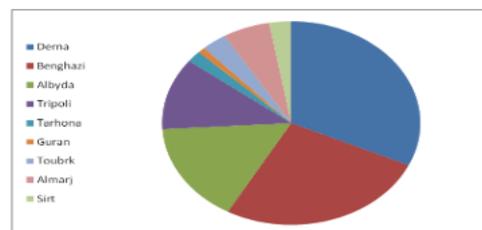
**Table 4.1** reveals that out of 244 respondents, 44.6% were males, while 55.4% were females, suggesting that women tend to observe a higher level of social distancing than men. Concerning the age group of the participants, 4.5% were under 20 years old, 51.3% were aged between 20 and 40, 42.4% were between 40 and 60 years old, and 1.8% were above 60. Among these participants, over 62.5% were employees, while 20.5% were

engaged in other occupations. In comparison, 5.8% were students, which is the same percentage as those engaged in business work, and the remaining 5.4% were retired from their jobs. Next, we examined the number of family members; 46% of the respondents had more than five family members, 23.2% had 3-4 family members, 17.4% had 1-2 family members, and the remaining 12.9% did not have a family at all. Nearly 50% had postgraduate degrees, 38.4% were graduates, and about 11.6% were undergraduate students. Moreover, most respondents, accounting for 80.8%, were married, 11.2% were single, 4.5% were divorced, and 3.6% were widowers. The salary distribution of the respondents indicated that 6.3% had an income of over 3000 dinars, 29.9% had incomes between 1000 and 2000 dinars, the same percentage for incomes between 2000 and 3000 dinars, and 29% had incomes between 450 and 1000 dinars. Meanwhile, 4.9% were not receiving any salary. Finally, the duration of social distancing was assessed, with 10.7% of individuals maintaining distance for one week, 34.4% for two weeks, 33.5% for three weeks, and the remaining 21.4% adhering to social distancing for more than one month, given that the government

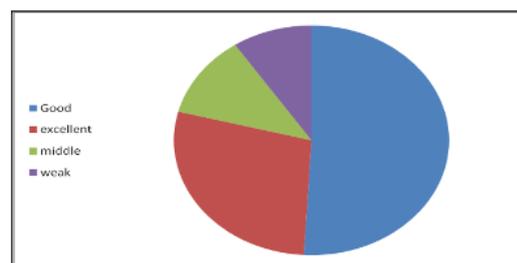
considered strategies to minimize exposure to COVID-19.

In the next section, respondents were asked about their accommodation. They indicated that 31.5% were residing in Derna, 25.9% in Benghazi, 15.6% in Albyda, and 11.2% in Tripoli.

**Figure 4.1 below presents the accommodation distribution of the study's respondents.**



Then, respondents were asked about their health status. Out of 244 respondents, 50% reported being in good health, while 11.6% said their health was average or moderate. 28% had excellent health conditions, and the remaining 9.3% had weak health conditions. **Figure 4.2** below presents the health status of the study's participants.



**Figure 4.2 below presents the health status of the study's participants**

### \* Results Descriptive Analysis

The results have been statistically explored in three

sections. Firstly, descriptive analysis was conducted to test hypothesis one, followed by an examination of the relationships between variables to test hypothesis two. Subsequently, the results of the mediation impact were analyzed in the last section.

Concerning the descriptive analysis, social distancing yielded the highest mean score (Mean = 3.68; ss. = 0.50), while patronage intention scored (Mean = 3.58; ss. = 0.74), and demographics had the lowest mean score of all (Mean = 2.42; ss. = 0.42). Based on the mean score for 'patronage intention' (Mean = 3.58; ss. = 0.74), respondents generally emphasized the necessity of patronage intention in maintaining social distancing for retail stores, especially if recommended by the government, and if they intend to patronize these stores. Meanwhile, Libyan consumers are generally aware of social distancing in the context of disease spread.

**Table 4.2** displays the highest mean score for the response "*it is important to go to the store for shopping during the period of maintaining social distancing if recommended by the government, both in the present pandemic and in the future.*" This response garnered a mean score of 3.78 with ss. = (0.961). Additionally, a high mean score was

observed for the statement regarding intention, specifically, "*I would maintain a good relationship with this store while practicing social distancing in two instances of a pandemic and the future,*" with a mean score of 3.73 and ss. = (1.002). Lastly, the statement, "*I intend to recommend this store to my friends and relatives while maintaining social distancing in two instances of a pandemic and the future,*" received a mean score of (Mean = 3.66; ss. = (1.137).

These results shown widespread adherence to Libyan customers' patronage intention. Subsequent estimates were then conducted to address the stated hypothesis.

**Table 4. 2: Mean Scores of Patronage Intentions**

Variables		Mean	ss
Social distancing		3.68	0.50
Demographics		2.42	0.42
Patronage intention		3.58	0.74
Y1	I have the intention of recommending these stories to my friends and relatives during maintaining social distancing in 2 times of pandemic and in future.	3.66	1.137
Y2	I considered this store my favorite choice to buy my needs during maintaining social distancing in 2 times of pandemic and in future	3.59	1.183
Y3	I would to be in a good relationship with this store during maintaining social distancing in 2 times of pandemic and in future	3.73	1.002
Y4	I am likely to deal with this store during maintaining social distancing in 2 times of the pandemic and in future	3.65	.982
Y5	I will use this store during maintaining social distancing in 2 times of the pandemic and in future	3.19	.990
Y6	It is important to go to this store for my shopping in the period of maintaining social distancing if the government recommended it during 2 times of pandemic and in future	3.78	.961
<b>Total</b>		<b>3.58</b>	<b>0.74</b>

**H2:** *There is a significant relationship between social distancing and patronage intention in in-store retail settings in Libya during two pandemic periods.*

Following the descriptive analyses, the researcher performed a correlation analysis to examine the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. This test specifically addresses H2 in the current study. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in **Table 4.3** below:

**Table 4.3: Pearson Correlation Coefficients**

Correlations			
		Social distancing	Patronage intention
Social distancing	Pearson Correlation	1	.395
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000
	N		224
Patronage to intention	Pearson Correlation	.395	
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	
	N	224	

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 4.3** illustrates the Pearson correlation coefficients between social distancing and patronage intention. Surprisingly, the results revealed a positive correlation between social distancing and patronage intention in Libyan retail stores during the second occurrence of COVID-19. The correlation coefficient was 0.395 (sig <.01). Consequently, the study acknowledges that social distancing exhibits a significant and weak

positive relationship with patronage intention. Additionally, the results suggest that Libyan customers are mindful of social distancing when there is any disease spreading in the country. Meanwhile, customers' behaviors and opinions regarding in-store experiences were influenced by the preventive measures related to social distance, leading to a decrease in their intention to patronize the stores.

**\* Mediation Test Analyses**

The mediation test analysis tests the following hypothesis.

**H3:** *Demographic variables will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention in retail stores in Libya during two pandemic periods.*

**H3a:** Gender will mediate the relation between social distancing and patronage intentions in retail stores in Libya during two times of the pandemic.

**H3b:** Age will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention in retail stores in Libya during two periods of the pandemic.

**H3c:** Socio-economic factors will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions in retail stores in Libya during two times of the pandemic.

**H3d:** Marital status will mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions in retail stores in Libya during two times of the pandemic.

Baron and Kenny (1986) outlined three requirements for establishing a mediating effect. Firstly, the independent variable should be influenced by the mediating variable. Secondly, the independent variable should impact the dependent variable, leading to a reduction in the regression coefficient of the independent variable. Additionally, a relationship with the dependent variable should be established after introducing the mediating variable into the model. Table 4.3 presents the results of the mediation tests in this study to assess these three mediation criteria. The researchers conducted a linear regression analysis to investigate mediation and followed the four criteria outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986; 1988). The following equations were employed in the regression analysis:

**Procedure 1:**

$$\text{Equation one} = \text{pat int} = \beta_{01} + \beta_1 \text{social-dis}$$

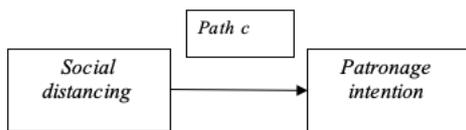


Figure 4.3. 1 Procedure 1

**Procedure 2:**

$$\text{Equation two} = \text{Demogr} = \beta_{02} + \beta_2 \text{social-dis}$$

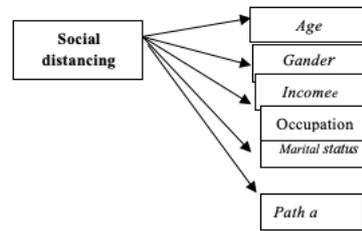


Figure 4. 3.2: Procedure 2

**Procedure 3:**

$$\text{Equation three} = \text{Demogr} = \beta_{03} + \beta_3 \text{pat int}$$

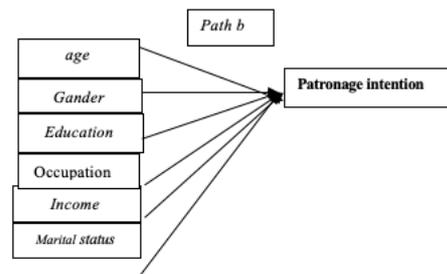


Figure 4.3.3: Procedure 3

**Procedure 4:**

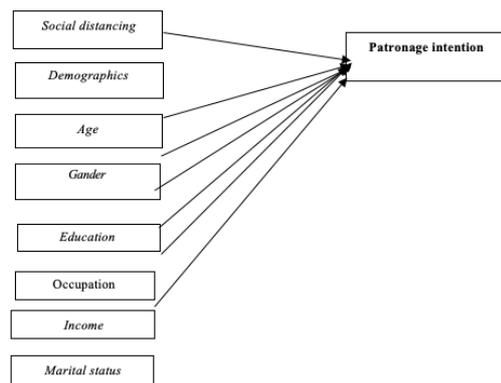


Figure 4. 3.4: Mediating Test Process

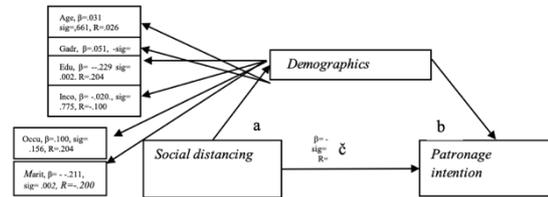
Figure 4.3.1 indicates procedure one of the tests, where the regression analysis sufficiently

explains the variance in the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention since the significance level (sig) is 0.000, which is less than 0.05, and  $\beta = 0.395$ . Consequently, it satisfies procedure one of a mediation model.

**Figure 4.3.2** indicates procedure two, the tests where the regression analysis sufficiently explains the variance in the relationship between social distancing and demographic variables such as age, gender, socio-economic factors (education, income, and position), and marital status since the significance level (sig) is more than 0.05, indicating it is not statistically significant (see Table 5). These steps are illustrated by Baron and Kenny (1986), who recommended the mediation analysis. If any conditions are not statistically significant, the researcher cannot proceed to test procedure three, as shown in **Figure 4.3.3**. This condition cannot be reached because demographics have not exhibited statistical significance concerning social distancing. In summary, demographic factors such as age, gender, education, income, position, and marital status do not mediate the relationship between social distancing and patronage intentions, as hypothesized in **Figure 4.3.4**. This

implies that H3a, b, c, and d are not accepted. The summary of test procedures is presented in **Table 5**.

**Figure 4.3.5: Mediation Analysis**



**Table 5; Test Mediation Demographics**

Procedures	independent variable	dependent variable	R	Coefficient (β)	Beta	Sig	Hypothesis 3
Procedure one	Social-Dis	Pat Int	.395	.270	.395	.000	Accepted
Procedure two	Social-Dis	Demo					
		Age	.026	.026	.031	.661	Rejected
		Gender	.021	.052	.051	.442	Rejected
		Education	.204	-.169	-.229	.002	Rejected
		Income	-.100	-.009	-.020	.775	Rejected
		Occupation	.027	.048	.100	.156	Rejected
		Marital st	.200	-.187	-.211	.002	Rejected
Stop Test Mediation							

\* Note: *social-dis* =, *pat int* = *social-dis*, *Demogr* =; Significant at alpha = 0.05

### \* Conclusion and Recommendation

The study aimed to investigate the mediating role of demographic variables on the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention in retail stores during two pandemic periods in Libya. The analysis highlighted the general adherence of Libyan customers to patronage intentions while maintaining social distancing during two pandemic periods. This suggests that if the government recommends social distancing in retail outlets, respondents generally express the intention to patronize those establishments. Additionally, Libyan

customers are aware of the importance of avoiding social distancing when a disease is spreading.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between social distancing and patronage intention, supporting the proposed hypothesis (H2) for the study. The results indicate that COVID-19 has influenced Libyan consumers' intentions and behavior, impacting interactions in stores and shopping habits. Moreover, the preventive measures for social distancing have affected customers' behavior and perceptions of in-store experiences, leading to a reduced inclination to patronize the store. The result related with studies by (Maryati 2020; Prasad 2023, Ang,etal.2021). reported significant changes in consumer behavior driven by the global impact of COVID-19.

The mediation test analysis indicated that procedure one, testing the regression analysis, sufficiently explained the variance in the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention. However, procedure two, which explored demographic factors( age, gander, education, income, martial statue as mediating variables, did not significantly mediate the relationship, leading to the rejection

of H3. The researchers were unable to test procedure three, following Baron and Kenny's (1986) advice, as factors were not statistically significant. This implies that demographic factors among Libyan consumers do not impact the relationship between social distancing and patronage intention.

Contrary to these findings, some published studies, such as Al-Dmour et al. (2021), suggest that demographic factors can influence consumer behavior in retail establishments. For instance, the COVID-19 virus appears to be more concerning to younger people and men. This underscores the importance of demography in understanding consumer behavior during crises. While the results of this study differ from some previous studies, such as Ryu (2021), which reported significant changes in consumer behavior due to the international impact of COVID-19, they align with studies like Bouthahab and Khaled (2020), Pedersen and Favero (2020), and Alkhatib (2020).Ang et al (2021) These studies successfully used the concept of social distancing in marketing to raise awareness about COVID-19.

#### **\* Implications**

The study's practical implications extend to businesses in

Libya, particularly retailers, who can leverage the current findings to develop strategies for managing their customers during a pandemic. For example, businesses can design marketing campaigns to underscore the importance of social distancing and the associated safety measures for customers (Dubbelink, Herrando & Constantinides 2021). Additionally, operational strategies, such as capacity management and store layout, can be devised to ensure social distancing while maintaining an optimal customer experience (Schleper, Gold, Trautrim & Baldock 2021). Moreover, practitioners can utilize the findings to create training opportunities for employees, focusing on effective communication with customers and informing them about social distancing and safety measures, as suggested by Bonfanti, Vigolo and Yfantidou (2021).

The study also carries significant implications for Libyan society, emphasizing the adherence to social distancing measures during the pandemic, which signals a positive development for public health. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of education and communication in promoting social distancing among customers during the pandemic. This implies that the

outcome can be utilised to support marketing plans for handling any issue. Furthermore, this study is among the few that aims to understand Libyan customers' retail patronage behaviour. This highlights the critical role that businesses have played in safeguarding public health by implementing substantial measures (Abumalloh et al. 2021).

#### **\* Limitations and Further Research**

Several limitations may have influenced the results obtained in the current research. Firstly, one limitation is that the distributed questionnaires were conducted over an extended period, resulting in a prolonged data collection process, and the delayed responses from Libyan customers led to a smaller sample size than initially planned by the researchers. Additionally, the study solely focused on investigating intentional behavior and social distancing during a two-time pandemic. The government's complete control over pandemic measures may have overlooked customers' behaviors, as customers may have had to take precautions that might not yield immediate results. Ongoing investigations in this area are expected to provide more insights into customers' behaviors in in-store retail, including satisfaction and loyalty. To address this, the

researchers aim to expand the sample size and explore alternative data collection methods, such as distributing questionnaires directly in physical in-store retails, along with implementing safety precautions.

Future studies could explore additional variables related to customer behavior during pandemic-induced vacancies. Comparative studies with other countries that have experienced pandemics could offer valuable insights. Researchers may consider examining factors associated with social distancing and patronage intention in different demographic clusters within Libya. A longitudinal study could track variations in patronage intentions over a more extended period, especially during a pandemic. Furthermore, future research might investigate the impact of other variables, such as trust and perceived risk, on social distancing and patronage intentions. Exploring the relationship between demographic variables and patronage intentions during health crises in the country is also suggested.

Given that retail stores play a crucial role in the spread of COVID-19, it is recommended that Libyan marketing professionals and public officials make efforts to provide customers with more information

about social distancing. This becomes particularly important when customers may not pay attention to safety precautions and social distancing rules during their store visits.

In conclusion, this study provides marketers and researchers with valuable insights into Libyan consumer behavior and demographic variables, addressing gaps in the existing literature regarding social distancing and safety precautions. The findings can guide strategies to attract more customers to retail establishments in the event of future health crises in Libya. This study represents one of the few attempts to understand the patronage behavior of Libyan customers in retail stores.

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