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A Global Pandemic's Effect on the Retail Industry

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Sabriyah Arain

MAT 395 – 002

Final Research Paper

A Global Pandemic's Effect on the Retail Industry

INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of the retail industry, what comes to mind? Usually, it has something to do with bustling crowds in malls, shopping carts full of products, or shelves and racks lined with clothing. For a while, this seemed relatively accurate. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed this view. The retail sector has been hit hard during these times, since most consumers are choosing to stay safe at home rather than go out to shop. The pandemic has forced large numbers of retailers to close, either temporarily or permanently. Retailers are facing many short-term challenges, such as health and safety, supply chain, labor force, cash flow, and consumer demand and marketing issues (Goldberg, 2020). It is anticipated that after the pandemic, the retail world will never look the same. It is important that companies change their operations accordingly in order to survive and continue to be successful.

It can be argued that one of the most important times for retailers is the holiday season. This fourth quarter is oftentimes the period where retailers have the largest opportunity to make sales. Consumers are out looking for gifts for various events, and retailers are responsible for ensuring that their marketing strategies are enticing enough to get them to purchase from their stores. The holiday season serves as a time when the most consumers are out shopping and the most products are being sold. This then begs the question: what was the holiday season like during the pandemic? What changes were made to operations and marketing? The goal of this paper will be to discover how COVID-19 has impacted the retail industry by evaluating changes that occurred this holiday season (2020) as compared to last year's season (2019). Three categories will be analyzed: visual displays, shopping patterns, and marketing tactics. Upon conducting research, predictions will be made about what the future of the retail industry may look like.

VISUAL DISPLAYS

The first category to be evaluated is how visual displays of retailers changed during the 2020 holiday season compared to the 2019 season. To see this change, social media postings, particularly on Instagram, were analyzed from four different retailers in the Lexington area with similar target age groups. Two traditional mall stores and two local boutiques were chosen. Mall stores tend to be larger with more locations. They also have standardized operations that span across all locations nationwide. On the other hand, boutiques tend to be smaller, with much fewer locations. They are more specialized than mall stores, and individual owners have more input regarding the specific operations of each location. Mall stores were chosen to be evaluated because it is important to see how COVID-19 has impacted operations on a national level. Looking at stores that are standardized with many locations allows for the opportunity to observe changes on a broader scale. On the other hand, local boutiques were chosen for the opposite reason. These retailers allow for the opportunity to see how the pandemic has impacted retailers locally, specifically in the Lexington area.

The mall retailers selected were Altar'd State and Express. Altar'd State is a retailer that sells boho chic clothing and accessories. The company's target market includes women in their early 20's to early 30's interested in trendy clothing ("Altar'd State: Elevating Altar'd State's Social Media ROI," 2018). Express is a retailer that sells fashion-forward clothing for men and women. Their target market includes consumers between 20 and 30 years old (Zacks, 2018). These two retailers were chosen because both have a similar target market and sell fashionable clothing. The two local boutiques selected were Calypso Boutique and E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique. Calypso Boutique sells trendy women's clothing, shoes, and accessories. Their target market is typically young women in their 20's. E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique sells

contemporary women's clothing and accessories. Their target market is women in their early 20's to mid-30's. These two retailers were chosen because they also have similar target markets and product lines. All four retailers helped to develop a broad understanding of the visual techniques used by different retailers in the fashion industry.

Social media serves as an excellent source to see how visual displays change over time through the kind of content that is posted. It was decided that changes in Instagram posts for each retailer would be compared from the 2019 holiday season to the 2020 holiday season. This was done by evaluating posts from November 1st to December 31st from both 2019 and 2020 for each company.

Altar'd State Social Media Analysis

The first retailer to be analyzed was Altar'd State. During the 2019 holiday period, the company posted an average of 31 posts per week. In November, most posts featured the introduction of new knitwear, pajamas, and outerwear. In December, the majority of posts featured Christmas gifts, holiday dresses, and knitwear (Altar'd State, 2021). During the 2020 period, Altar'd State's posts averaged 26 per week. This is a slight decrease compared to that of the 2019 season. In November, most posts consisted of introducing new active wear, loungewear, and knitwear. In December, most posts featured loungewear, home décor, and knitwear (Altar'd State, 2021).

Express Social Media Analysis

The next retailer to be analyzed was Express. This company averaged a total of 14 posts per week during the 2019 holiday season. In November, most posts consisted of advertising for new denim, knitwear, and outerwear. In December, the majority of posts advertised for knitwear, outerwear, and holiday party outfits (Express, 2021). During the 2020 holiday season, Express

posted an average of 16 posts per week. This is an increase in posts compared to 2019. In November, most posts featured knitwear, loungewear, and outerwear. In December, the majority of posts introduced new pajamas, loungewear, and knitwear (Express, 2021).

Calypso Boutique Social Media Analysis

The third retailer to be analyzed was Calypso Boutique. During the 2019 holiday season, the boutique averaged a total of 14 posts per week. In November, posts consisted mainly of knitwear, outerwear, and denim. In December, posts primarily included party dresses, knitwear, and Christmas gifts (Calypso Boutique, 2021). During the 2020 season, there was an average of 46 posts per week. This is a dramatic increase compared to the 2019 season. In November, the majority of posts included loungewear, knitwear, and long-sleeved tops. In December, posts mainly consisted of loungewear, knitwear, dresses, and Christmas gifts (Calypso Boutique, 2021).

E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique Social Media Analysis

The fourth retailer to be analyzed was E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique. During the 2019 holiday season, the boutique averaged 15 posts per week. In November, most posts consisted of promoting new party dresses, knitwear, skirts, and denim. In December, posts mainly included knitwear, party dresses, outerwear, and Christmas gifts (E. Leigh's Boutique, 2021). During the 2020 season, the boutique posted an average of 17 posts per week, which is an increase compared to 2019. In November, the majority of posts included casual dresses, knitwear, and loungewear. In December, most posts consisted of outerwear, knitwear, loungewear, and Christmas gifts (E. Leigh's Boutique, 2021).

Social Media Analysis

Based on this research, many observations can be made. Besides Altar'd State, all other retailers increased their number of weekly posts in 2020. This is likely due to the fact that consumers were spending more time at home, hence spending more time scrolling through social media and shopping online. As a result of the pandemic, retailers' social media followers are spending more time online than before, which creates a unique opportunity to help retailers deepen relationships with consumers and increase brand affinity as well (Loren, 2020). These retailers wanted to take advantage of this change by advertising more products in an attempt to boost sales and increase customer retention, even if people were no longer shopping in stores as frequently.

Not only did the number of posts per week change from 2019 to 2020, but the content of the posts also did. All retailers introduced loungewear during the 2020 holiday season that had not been advertised in 2019. The analysis of over 16,000 retailers has shown that loungewear has proven itself to be the most popular 'lockdown clothing' category. There was a 433% jump in demand compared to the previous year ("The Ecommerce Loungewear & Sleepwear Category is Booming," 2020). Retailers such as E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique began posting more casual clothing overall in 2020. Altar'd State posted more home décor and active wear as well in 2020. These changes were made to further cater to the needs of consumers who were spending most of their time at home during the pandemic.

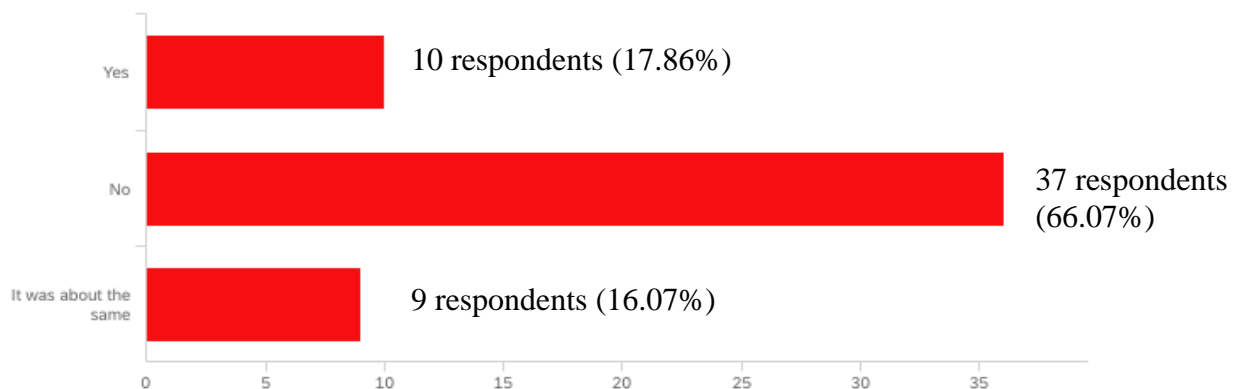
Another way that retailers changed their visual displays on social media was through promoting more sales in 2020. For all retailers, there was a noticeably larger amount of promotional posts in 2020 than in 2019. These retailers saw that online sales were increasing, so they made sure to advertise more promotions to further encourage consumers to continue shopping with their company instead of their competitors.

SHOPPING PATTERNS

The second category to be evaluated is how the pandemic has changed the shopping patterns of consumers this holiday season as compared to last year's season. This was done by conducting a survey that was sent to UK students asking questions about changes in their consumption patterns during the holidays this year as compared to last year. This would allow for the access of first-hand information from real consumers. Questions were included regarding which platforms or methods they used the most when shopping, how often they shopped, and what kinds of products they shopped for the most. In the introduction to the survey, it was specified that students answer the questions in relation to their purchasing patterns when shopping for gifts rather than shopping for themselves. The survey had a total of 56 respondents.

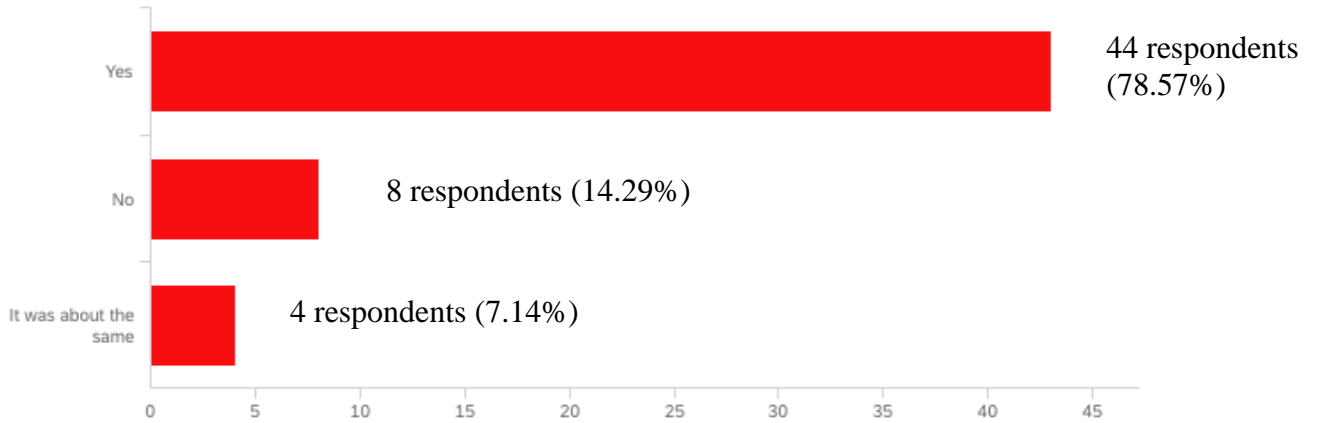
Survey Results

1. Did you make more in-store gift purchases during the 2020 holiday season than you did during the 2019 holiday season?



The majority of respondents (66.07%) answered “No”.

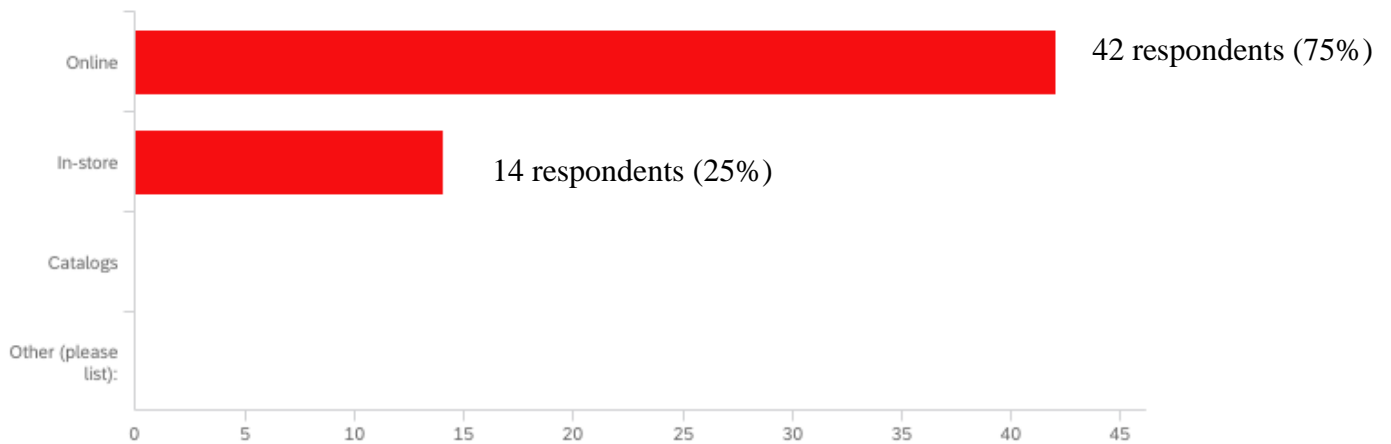
2. Did you make more online gift purchases during the 2020 holiday season than you did during the 2019 holiday season?



The majority of respondents (78.57%) answered “Yes”.

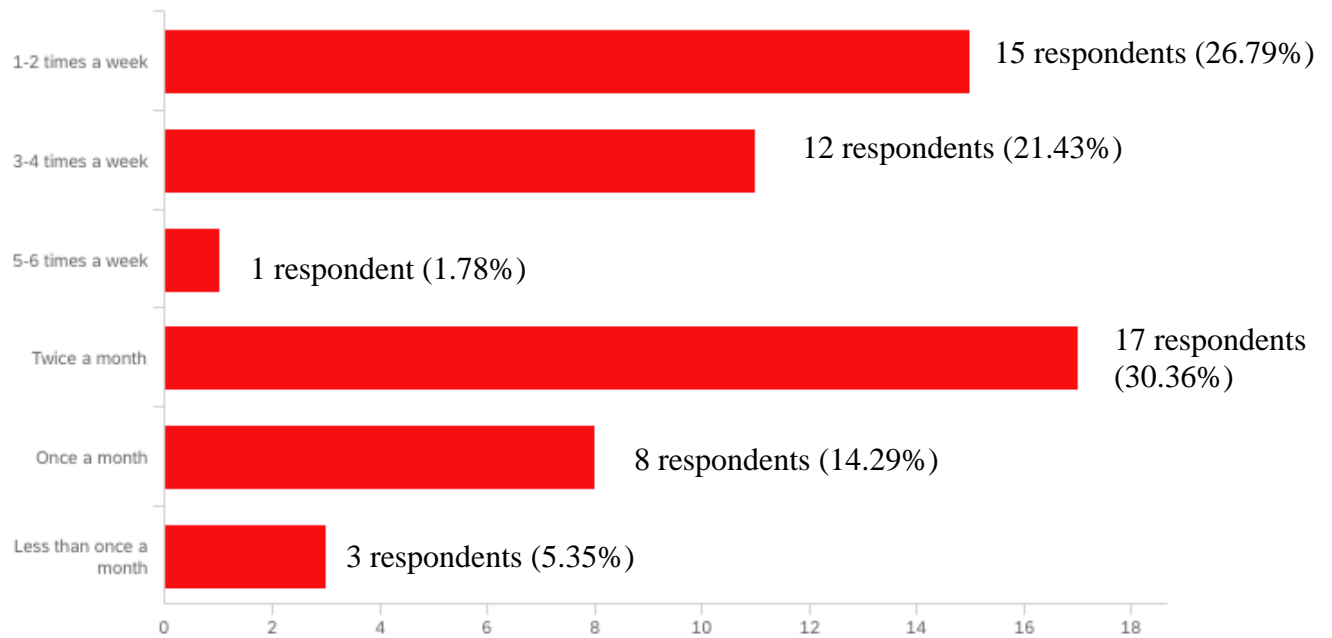
3. Which method did you use the most to purchase gifts during the 2020 holiday season?

Please choose only one.



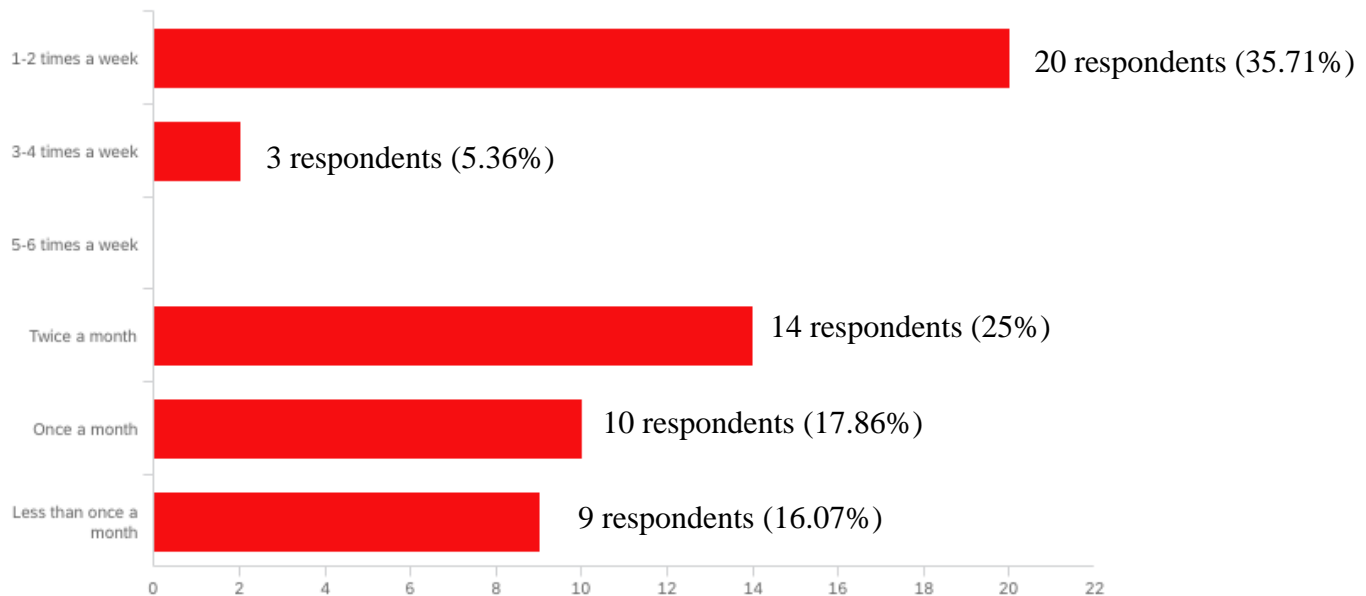
The majority of respondents (75%) answered “Online”.

4. How often did you purchase gifts online during the 2020 holiday season?



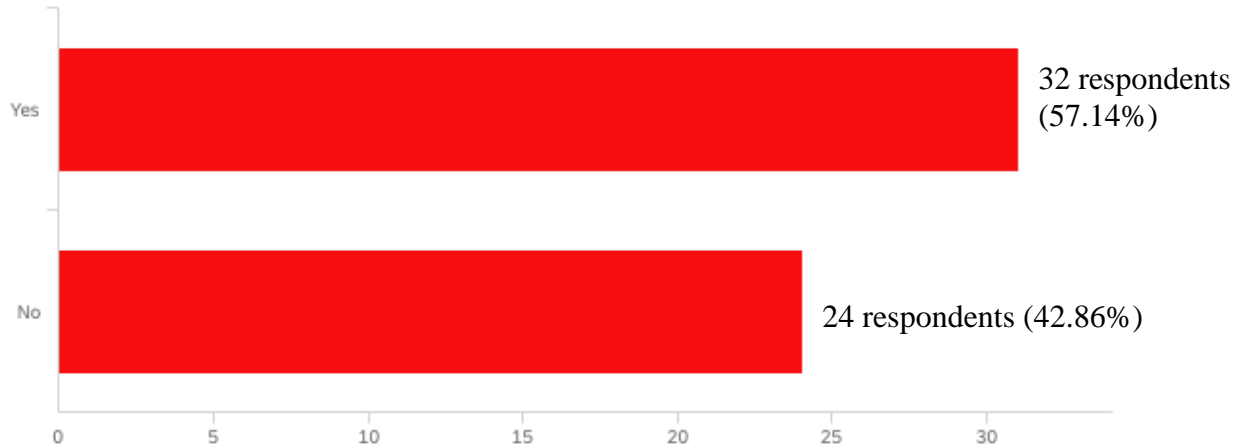
The two answers with the highest number of respondents were “Twice a month” (30.36%) and “1-2 times a week” (26.79%).

5. How often did you purchase gifts in-store during the 2020 holiday season?



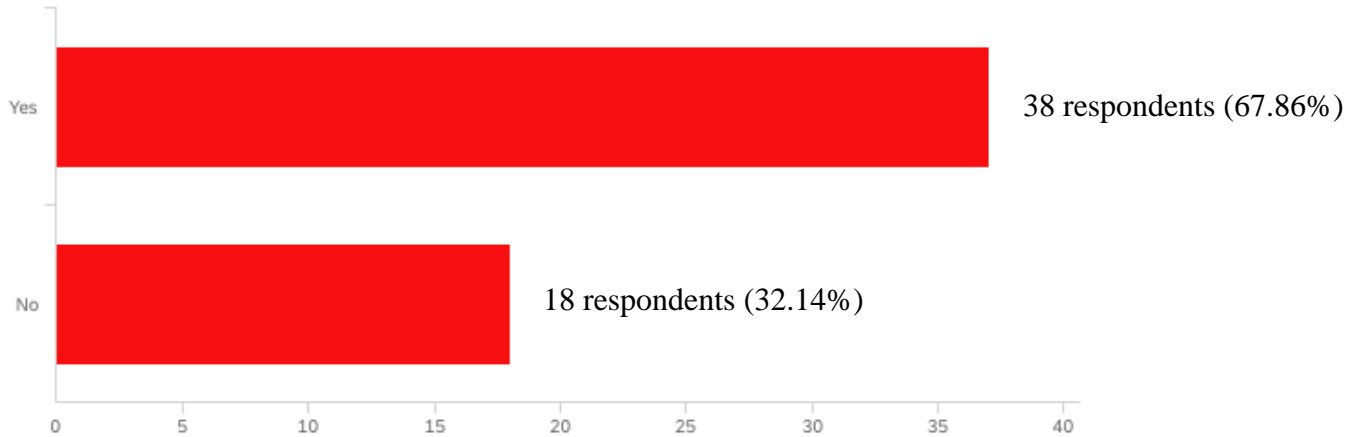
The two answers with the highest number of respondents were “1-2 times a week” (35.71%) and “Twice a month” (25%).

6. Did the COVID-19 pandemic make you more hesitant to purchase gifts in-store? Please explain why.



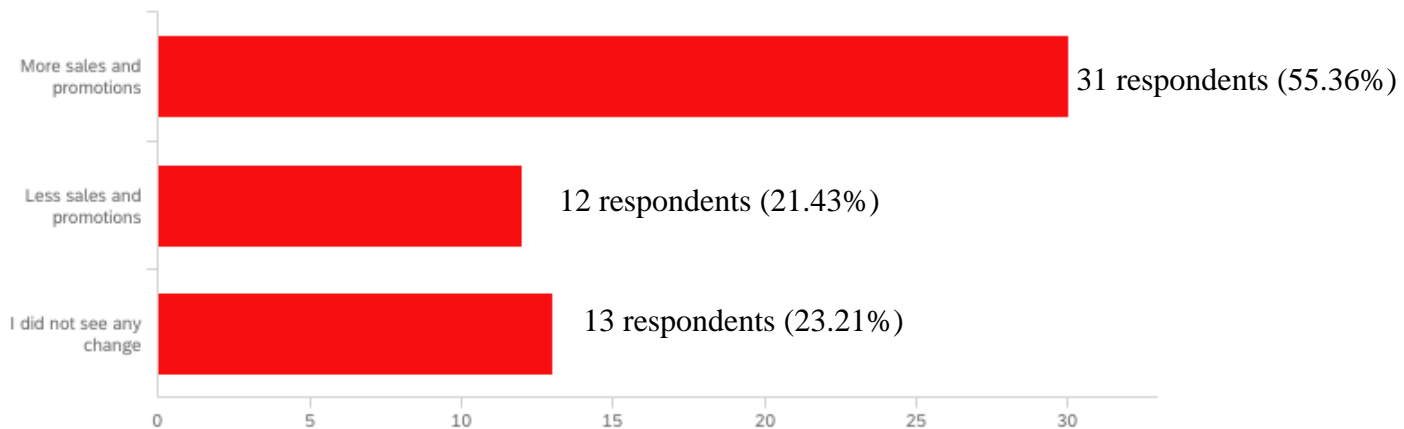
The majority of respondents (57.14%) answered “Yes”. Many respondents said that they were hesitant because they did not feel as safe shopping in-store, where there are large crowds and many people touching the items. In addition, a large number of respondents stated that they disliked the fact that they could not test out or try on products in stores and that there was usually a smaller selection of products in stores. The majority of respondents stated that they thought it was safer and more convenient to shop online.

7. Did you purchase as many gifts during the 2020 holiday season as you did during the 2019 holiday season? Please explain why.



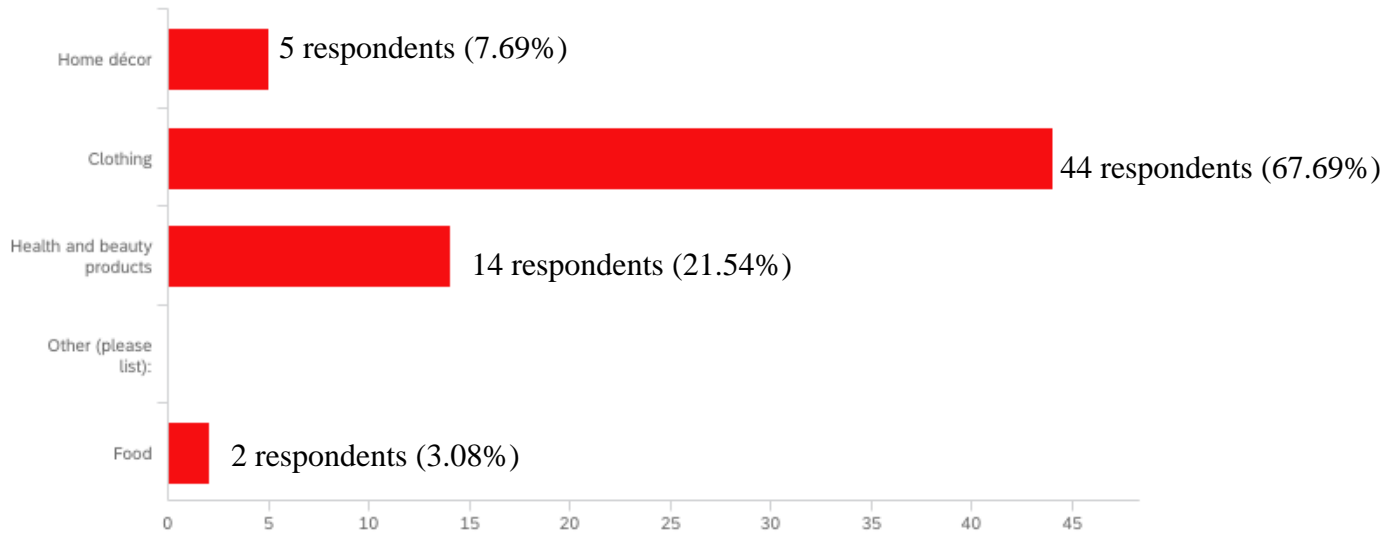
The majority of respondents (67.86%) answered “Yes”. Most respondents explained that even though COVID-19 was prevalent, they still had the same amount of people that they needed to buy gifts for as they did in 2019. Many people stated that they were still able to purchase just as many gifts because online shopping was a convenient option.

8. How did the sales and promotions of stores differ during the 2020 holiday season as compared to 2019?



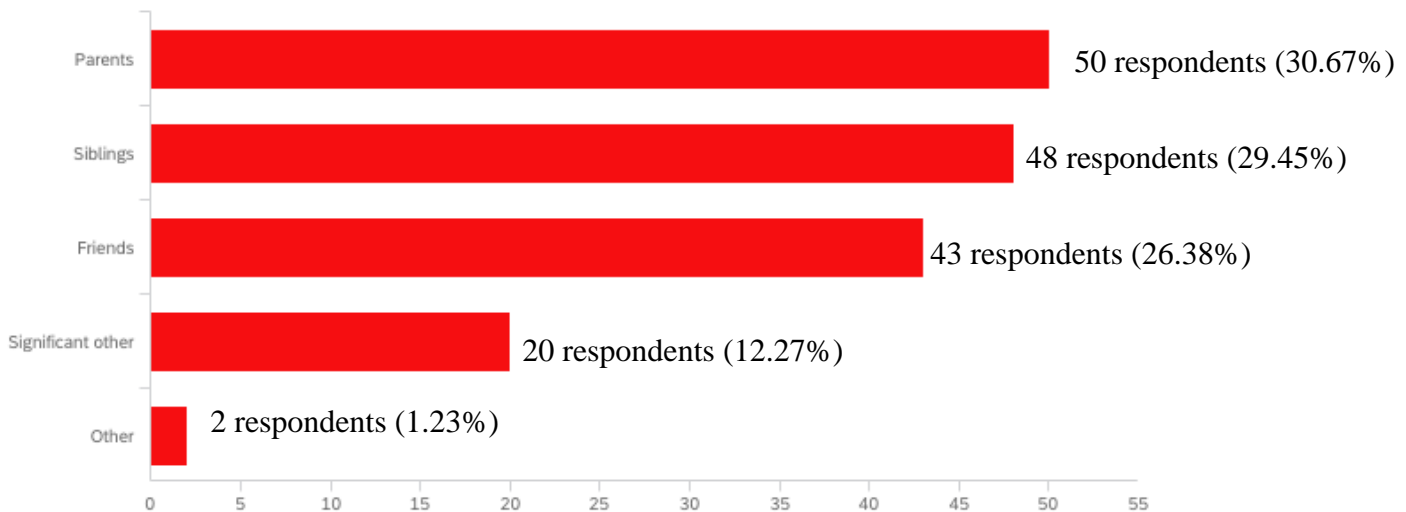
The majority of respondents (55.36%) answered “More sales and promotions”.

9. What category of gifts did you purchase the most during the 2020 holiday season? Please choose only one.



This data is slightly inconsistent because some respondents selected multiple answers instead of only choosing one. In total, there were 65 answers for this question. The majority of respondents (67.69%) answered “Clothing”.

10. Who did you purchase gifts for during the 2020 holiday season? Check all that apply.



The top three answers were “Parents” (30.67%), “Siblings” (29.45%), and “Friends” (26.38%).

Survey Analysis

These results yielded a multitude of useful information. First, it can be seen that online shopping increased during the 2020 season as compared to 2019. 78.57% of respondents stated that they made more online gift purchases this past season. This seems to be mostly due to safety reasons regarding the COVID-19 pandemic along with more convenient options being available online. It is interesting to see that while the survey results suggest that online shopping increased, the frequency of online shopping compared to in-store shopping seems to have been similar. This information then suggests that while students did not frequently shop online, they may have purchased many items at one time since they had access to multiple different retailers online. So, although the frequency of both shopping methods appears relatively the same, this can still mean that students visited more retailers online and chose to shop less frequently overall.

Another observation that can be made is that students continued to buy relatively the same number of gifts in 2020 as they did in 2019. 67.86% of respondents stated that they still purchased the same number of gifts because they still had to shop for the same individuals. These individuals mostly included family, friends, and siblings. This shows how adaptable consumers are to a changing retail world. Individuals still found ways to purchase the gifts they needed even though shopping methods were slightly different. It appears that students gifted clothing the most, which is a popular gift category for any holiday season.

Lastly, the survey results show that the majority of students saw an increase in sales and promotions for retailers. 55.36% of respondents stated that they noticed more promotional advertising during the 2020 holiday season. This relates to the idea that companies aimed to continue to make sales during these challenging times by finding new ways to encourage consumers to shop.

MARKETING TACTICS

The third category to be evaluated is to discover ways that COVID-19 impacted how retail companies used marketing tactics to encourage consumers to purchase from their brand this holiday season versus last season.

According to Maria Grimaldi, there were three primary trends related to how retailers changed their marketing methods during the pandemic. First, many changed the overall customer experience by expanding on e-commerce platforms to create more immersive sites that foster human connection (2020). They have done so through creating more personalized online experiences where customers can browse through products specifically chosen for them. The second change is that retailers have capitalized on using social media platforms for e-commerce. This has particularly been done through Facebook and Instagram, where consumers can purchase a product directly from a retailer's profile page (Grimaldi, 2020). Companies are aware that consumers are spending more time on screens during the pandemic, so they are now taking advantage of this trend. The third major change is that retailers have had to become more flexible with getting products to consumers. This has included new methods such as same-day delivery and customer pick-up options (Grimaldi, 2020). Retailers have had to find ways to continue to meet customers' expectations and make products available as early as possible.

After discovering what general changes retailers made to their marketing strategies, it was time to see how these changes coincided with real in-store marketing examples from the 2019 to 2020 holiday season. To find this information, the managers of the two mall stores (Altar'd State and Express) and local boutiques (Calypso Boutique and E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique) previously mentioned were interviewed. These managers were asked questions regarding changes in the consumption of products and overall marketing tactics. This strategy allowed for the acquisition of first-hand data from well-known retailers in the area to learn about

real experiences regarding changes in marketing strategies. Below are the questions that were asked, along with the answers from each manager.

Interview Answers

1. How much foot traffic was there in the store this holiday season compared to last year's?

Altar'd State: Traffic was down about 30-35% from the 2019 holiday season.

Express: Traffic during the 2020 holiday season was down about 30% as compared to the year before.

Calypso Boutique: Traffic was about the same.

E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique: Traffic was down at least 20-30% from the 2019 season.

2. How did your marketing tactics change this season compared to last year's?

Altar'd State: A lot of extra in-store marketing was used this past holiday season. There was also increased company-wide social media usage. Regarding the Fayette Mall location in particular, all sales associates posted on their own social media accounts to promote special events.

Express: There were a lot more emails sent out this year because consumers were spending more time on their cell phones. More funds were also put towards increased social media posts and activity. In addition, "bounce backs" were introduced. This occurs when a customer receives a coupon to use within a certain amount of time after shopping in-store. This concept helped drive more traffic back into stores. Loyalty programs also gained a larger focus. Offers involving rewards programs and Express credit card usage were increased to further encourage consumers to continue shopping at Express.

Calypso Boutique: A local pickup option was advertised more prominently during the 2020 holiday season. It had been available during 2019 as well, but was not very well-known. The business now has more local pickup orders than they have ever had previously.

E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique: In 2020, online marketing was more heavily targeted since online business was a large focus during the pandemic. Several different tactics were experimented with, such as e-mail and text notifications for sales, sharing company marketing media with personal social media (Instagram and Facebook), and extending personal invitations to sales events.

3. What trends in product consumption did you see this season that weren't there last season?

Altar'd State: Customers bought less home décor items than during past holiday seasons. This was likely because people were more concerned about finances while under quarantine.

Consumers spent more money on actual clothing than on items such as home décor, hats, or accessories. Commonly purchased items included outerwear, sweaters, pants, and loungewear.

Express: More casual/comfortable clothing was sold. The company pushed products such as sherpa jackets, cozy pants, socks, sleepwear, and transitional pieces that one could wear in and out of the house.

Calypso Boutique: Loungewear, sweat suits, and comfy clothing were promoted much more in 2020. In addition, many masks were sold in 2020 and are still being sold.

E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique: Fashion trends were much less relevant in 2020, since a large number of consumers chose to avoid travel and large events. In the past, consumers have preferred party dresses and special occasion items. In 2020, these products were replaced with comfortable clothing and self-care items.

4. Did you use more in-store signage and advertising this year?

Altar'd State: A lot more in-store signage and advertising was used. Signage was known as the company's "silent seller" because it allowed the company to sell many products without having to directly speak to the customers about the promotions. Since hours were cut and foot traffic was down in the mall, fewer employees worked each shift. This meant that the store had to find different ways for promotions to be communicated to consumers.

Express: The window displays were more simplified this year to show newness. Instead of placing promotional banners in windows as Express has done previously, the windows only featured mannequins. This allowed consumers to see further inside the store so that there was more of a focus on the presentation of the front rooms to highlight the new products available. More table signage was used to further promote loyalty. This signage included special promotions that only rewards members had access to. Overall, however, there was not necessarily any new marketing changes around actual promotions.

Calypso Boutique: More in-store signage was not used, but more social media advertising was promoted.

E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique: Sales were changed more frequently, so more frequent signage was used to convey these new sales and draw attention to particular areas of focus.

5. What kind of in-store advertising did you use (posters, in-store only deals)? How did you encourage customers to shop in-store?

Altar'd State: The store works with Sarah Robinson, a woman who works in the mall office. She is very fond of Altar'd State and has provided large decals promoting Altar'd State to be set up near the office's location. She also allowed the store to be featured on a Fayette Mall commercial. The store has been able to build better relationships with other people and other

stores in the mall in order to have more promotional opportunities. These new marketing tactics have further encouraged consumers to visit Altar'd State.

Express: During a few weekends of the holiday season, the company hosted events specifically for rewards members. If one purchased products in-store and was a rewards member, he or she received 50% off of their purchase. Customers that were not part of the rewards program only received 30% off. This encouraged consumers who were already rewards members to continue to shop with Express and those who were new to the store to establish loyalty.

Calypso Boutique: A student discount day was created to promote in-store shopping. This required students to come in and show their student identification when checking out at the register. In addition, signage was used to assure customers that the boutique was taking all necessary safety precautions during the pandemic.

E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique: A lot of signage was used to promote ever-changing sales. Customers were encouraged to shop in-store through receiving in-store coupons in the mail and through e-mail.

6. Did you see any changes in in-store consumption patterns this year that you think may be permanent?

Altar'd State: Selling masks may be a permanent change. There has been a cultural shift due to COVID-19 in which mask-wearing is very normal and encouraged. It is likely that there will not be any other permanent changes because customers are already starting to match their previous purchase patterns from before the pandemic.

Express: Before the pandemic, customers used to come in the store with a vague idea of what they wanted. Now, customers have already looked online before coming into the store and know what they want. They already know the look they are going for, so the job of sales associates is

not to give ideas on what to wear, but rather to help put together a complete outfit with the vision that the customer has. It is likely that this kind of consumer trend will continue in the future.

Calypso Boutique: Local pickup orders will likely continue to make up a large part of sales.

Also, comfy clothing/sweat suits will likely continue to be sold.

E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique: It is likely that customers will continue to shop online.

However, there will still always be a place for brick-and-mortar business, since this experience is completely different and tailored to each customer.

7. How do you feel your window displays from this holiday season compare to those from last year?

Altar'd State: The company tried to make the window display set-up cheaper and more time efficient this past holiday season. During the 2019 holiday season, many expensive props were used in the displays. The store tried to sell these props to consumers when they were no longer needed, but many items were not sold. They had to be given away or donated. The company is trying to save more money and use less time to set up the displays in order to become more efficient and focus on other store aspects.

Express: Banners were removed this year to allow consumers to be able to see into the store. Customers are able to see what products are available at a particular store location rather than only see the main idea that Express is trying to convey. Before, the store would often sell out of clothing items that were depicted on banners. Now, the mannequins' outfits can be switched out when a certain item sells out so that customers can see items that are actually being sold in-store.

Calypso Boutique: Since Calypso Boutique is a small establishment with mostly local customers, they did not feel the need to change their window displays as much since most

customers already knew what kinds of products they sold. So, displays did not change much from the 2019 to 2020 holiday season.

E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique: Window displays have remained similar. The goal is to always strive to create appealing, eye-catching displays. This goal became more relevant during the 2020 holiday season, but strategies remained the same.

Interview Analysis

Through these interview questions, many patterns can be discovered among these retailers. First, besides Calypso Boutique, it can be seen that all retailers experienced at least a 20% decrease in foot traffic during the 2020 holiday season as compared to 2019. This can be attributed to the increase in online sales. In addition, it can be seen that these retailers all changed their marketing tactics in some way during the 2020 holiday season. These changes included heavier social media usage, more convenient pickup options, and reaching out to customers through online methods. Also, all retailers introduced more comfortable clothing, such as loungewear, to their merchandise mix. This shows how these companies picked up on the current stay-at-home trends during the pandemic and catered to the needs of consumers to have more casual clothing that they could wear around the house. Besides Calypso Boutique, all retailers altered their in-store signage to appeal more to customers. For Express, this included simplifying window displays so that customers could see the actual products inside the store more easily. For Altar'd State and E. Leigh's Contemporary Boutique, this included adding more signage to further promote and advertise sales. Regarding in-store advertising, these retailers used personalized promotional events along with increased signage to get more customers in the store. Window displays did not change for all retailers, but the stores that did alter them stated that they did so to manage their displays more efficiently and attract more customers. All managers had

different opinions on what changes may be permanent after the COVID-19 pandemic is over, but they all agreed that things would not go completely back to normal.

CONCLUSION

It can be hypothesized that after the pandemic is over, the retail industry will not return to what it was before. Consumers and retailers alike have changed the way they view the shopping experience. Now, convenience and safety are two major concepts that are being taken into consideration. It is likely that some changes in retail strategies and consumption patterns may be permanent or long-lasting. Regarding retail strategies, it can be predicted that social media marketing will continue to be a major component of companies' marketing operations. As discovered in both the analysis of social media posts and interviews of store managers, social media served as a key component in promoting sales. According to Emily Wiltshire, social media content from businesses will continue to become more creative, and digital strategies will become a primary focus in the retail world (2020).

Another impact of the pandemic that is likely to last is the increase in online shopping. In the research conducted, it can be seen that consumers used online shopping methods much more during the 2020 holiday season than in previous years. As more individuals continue to shop online and order products to be delivered to their homes, they will get used to the convenience of these methods (Cluster, 2020). In-store shopping will still continue, but likely to a lesser extent. It is true that brick-and-mortar stores offer a personalized experience that is relatively unmatched when being compared to e-commerce platforms. However, many consumers are starting to value ease and convenience over these experiences, leading to a steady increase in online shopping in the future.

Lastly, it can be anticipated that the kinds of products that retailers sell will change after the pandemic. Every retailer that was analyzed in this paper introduced loungewear and other casual clothing to their product lines. Quarantine has made consumers rediscover the joy of staying at home, which has led to a rise in the demand for loungewear. After COVID-19 subsides, it is expected that home wardrobes will become a new trend (Durocher, 2021). The pandemic has caused many changes in the retail world, and it will be interesting to see what the future holds for the industry.

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