

# "Consumer experiences and values in Brazilian Northeast shopping centers"

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# CONSUMER EXPERIENCES AND VALUES IN BRAZILIAN NORTHEAST SHOPPING CENTERS

## Abstract

This study aims to expand the knowledge on consumer experiences and values from an innovative marketing perspective in the context of shopping centers of inland towns in the Brazilian Northeast region. A qualitative approach was adopted using 50 in-depth interviews of shopping center visitors to collect data. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to evaluate the data. The results revealed two main categories: unpleasant and pleasant experiences. In terms of main results, 23 participants have a mix of pleasant and unpleasant experiences, while 24 report only pleasant, and 3 – unpleasant experiences. The unpleasant experiences are mostly related to the excess of people ( $n = 19$ ). In what refers to pleasant experiences, functionality ( $n = 43$ ), and sensory ( $n = 33$ ) are the two most mentioned values, being functionality the top value to consumers regardless the purpose they have in going to the Shopping Centre. The results can be relevant inputs to design and manage Shopping Centers regarding cultural adjustment by considering consumers' experiences and values and the importance of joining competing values behind pleasant and unpleasant experiences. The study contributes to the experiential marketing literature by highlighting the importance of cultural contexts in consumer experiences and behavior research.

## Keywords

consumer behavior, cultural values, expectations, retail trend, interpretative phenomenological analysis

## JEL Classification

M31, M39

## INTRODUCTION

The Shopping Center (SC) concept is a retail trend disseminated worldwide, and a model implemented in different countries and cultures. Shopping Centers (SCs) have become increasingly “natural” environments for people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are a modern phenomenon with contemporary urban attractions and are large complex structures with repercussions in society's way of living (Wolf, 2003; Silva & Gonçalves, 2012; Debek, 2015).

Regardless their geographical location, SCs have common characteristics such as the architecture project, the products and services diversity and easy consumer access, as well as the marketing appeal to the consumer for their comfortable, safe and acclimatized environments and a general disconnection from the outside world (Silva & Gonçalves, 2012; ABRASCE, 2017). Additionally, SCs are inserted in a variety of cultural contexts and receive visitors with different lifestyles and perceptions of values, being impacted by cultural factors, which influence consumer behavior and experiences (Chandler & Lusch, 2015).

Even with the somewhat “homogeneous” model and the fact that consumer behavior and consumption habits are also influenced by global

trends, the place where people live can shape the way they feel and act (Hofstede et al., 2010) and influence consumer experience (Bascur & Rusu, 2020). The consumer's values perceive in their consumption experiences are likely to differ among distinct cultures (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The cultural dimensions represent distinguish consumers' preferences, and can influence their experiences and remodel their expectations (Foroudi et al., 2017; Lin & Liang 2011; Fantoni et al., 2014; Gijsenberg et al., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Chang & Hung, 2021).

Despite the variety of cultural values, in general, more than traditional functional shopping, consumers tend to seek meaningful experiences (Holbrook, 2006) where the values perceived by customers in their consumption experiences have an increasing central role in achieving good market performance. Thus, their identification has become essential for companies' survival and success (Payne & Holt, 2001; Sheth & Uslay, 2007, Bascur & Rusu, 2020). Currently, several methods allow evaluation of consumer experience but there is no evidence of theoretical model or heuristic evaluation of SC consumer experiences (Slongo & Meira, 1998; Bascur & Rusu, 2020). No one of these previous studies could be generalized to the Brazilian context.

Brazil has a "multicultural cauldron" of coexistence and miscegenation of different ethnic groups in each of its five regions (Casotti & Suarez, 2016). In this great cultural diversity context, with distinct historical and social characteristics and diversified markets, there is a noticeable need for retail companies to develop a cultural sensitivity for better understanding their consumers' behavior (Ferreira & Canen, 2011). Previous studies include the Ipsos Connect Survey (2017), the Consumer Insights (2018), and the study carried out by Nielsen (2014) in the North-East. As far as known, there are no studies about the SC consumers' experience and values perceived, especially those in inland towns, being important to identify clearly and define these values.

Even if taking into consideration globalization as a reinforcement of the homogenization of international phenomena, real-life processes can demonstrate a reaffirmation of differences. Cultural complexity has been studied increasingly and a growing amount of academic literature (Afseth et al., 2016) expresses concern about understanding the interplay between equality and difference among cultures. Within the same country, multiple cultures can coexist, which challenges organizations to understand the influence of regional characteristics on consumer preferences and habits (Strehlau et al., 2010). Even unethical behavior can be motivated by socio-cultural factors and national culture models (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2019).

Despite the current forces in favor of cultural globalization, if the analysis of experiential consumption is formed by elements of another country, this is not likely to reflect the reality under study reliably. Although the concept of the traditional SC seeks to standardize its constituent elements, it is important that consumers' experiences of consumption are studied, conceived and delineated according to their intrinsic cultural contexts (Ferreira & Canen, 2011).

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Consumer experiences and cultural realities

Schmitt (2000; 2003; 2009) classifies the consumer experiential world as the set of trends and specific experiences that include the following key elements: (1) Socio-cultural context concerning broad experiences relevant to behavioral trends,

lifestyles and other characteristics of consumer groups or cultures; (2) Usage and consumption situations related to customer experiences when using or consuming the product; (3) Product category experiences ignited from objective aspects related to tangible product characteristics; and (4) Brand or product experience provided by the brand, namely, perception of brand engagement. Consumer experiences are contextual in nature, varying from one person to another when inter-

acting with a specific situation or object (Holbrook, 2006). Such variation can be considered predictably from culture to culture, hence the importance of exploring the theme in different cultural contexts.

Previous studies have focused on the proposition of typologies, scales of values and taxonomies, consumer experiences and/or values perceived by consumers in SC environments. Some have a special focus on their cultural contexts, such as Andrade, Oliveira and Antonioli (2004), El-Adly and Eid (2015), El-Adly and Eid (2017), Farrag et al. (2010), Ribeiro Cardoso and Carvalho Pinto (2010), Gilboa et al. (2016), Lucia-Palacios et al. (2016), and Milan et al. (2013).

The research by Farrag et al. (2010) developed an understanding of SC experiences, from the perspective of Egyptian consumers, which resulted in 10 different clusters of consumption activities. Khare (2011) carried out a study that aimed to analyze the influence of hedonic and utilitarian consumption values on the attitudes of SC consumers in small towns in India. The author warns that SC operators need to understand the implications of consumer needs in the local context when planning SCs in smaller towns. Consumers in small Indian towns have different characteristics from those in metropolitan cities. Such differences can be perceived in their levels of income, power, social class and lifestyle. Thus, the culture of the SC, which transforms the life of metropolitan cities, may not obtain similar results in the vastly different contexts of smaller towns.

El-Adly and Eid (2015) has undertaken a relevant study. It was aimed to identify the dimensions of consumer experiences among SC consumers in the United Arab Emirates. Based on the consumer's perceived value, a scale was developed to measure the dimensions in a non-Western context. Eight dimensions were identified, namely hedonic, self-gratification, utilitarian, epistemic, social interaction, space convenience, transaction and convenience.

Gilboa and Vilnai-Yavetz (2013) and Gilboa et al. (2016) revealed the holistic nature of SC experience in the context of Israel. It is noted that in spite of the important contribution of their research to

the area under scrutiny no proposals can be generalized for the entire population of SC customers. Gilboa and Vilnai-Yavetz (2013) emphasize the importance of taking contextual elements, such as the local culture, into consideration when studying SC experiences.

## 1.2. Consumer experiences and perceived values

It is considered relevant to associate consumer theoretical constructs with perceived value and consumption experiences (Mathwick et al., 2001; Yuan & Wu, 2008). The identification of values perceived by consumers taking into account local variations in cultural composition may lead to a different articulation of the concept and experiences of SC (Farrag et al., 2010; El-Adly & Eid, 2015; Gilboa et al., 2016).

The different concepts – consumption, culture, consumer experience and customer value – are not consensual in the academic literature and are subject to different interpretations. Regarding experiences, they are considered integrative and interactive, requiring the individual's involvement with elements that support or allow those experiences. Experiences can be emotional and encompass personal interpretations of a situation, based on historical cultural factors, past experiences, humor and personality traits. Finally, experience is emphasized as means of creating value for the company and the client (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 2003; Pullman & Gross, 2003; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003).

Customer value focuses on the value generated by an organization, product or service, through the consumers' perceptions or assessment of their goal fulfillment concerning the products and/or services provided (Woodruff, 1997). Derived from the experience of consumption, value has a contextual and subjective nature. It is considered as multidimensional, since it consists of interrelated dimensions: utilitarian, functional, instrumental, task-related and hedonic values, emphasizing experiential, emotional or affective aspects (Babin et al., 1994) Holbrook, 2006; Gallarza et al., 2011; Gummrus, 2013; Medberg & Heinonen, 2014; Dodds et al., 2014).

In defining the consumer experience, Schmitt (2003) considers the need to analyze the socio-cultural context experienced by clients through their needs, aspirations and lifestyles. This notion is shared by Dabholkar (2006) and Lemke, Clark and Wilson (2010), who suggest that consumer experiences can be strongly influenced by the social environment and interpersonal interactions. Therefore, it can be deduced that consumer behavior is impacted by cultural, social, personal and psychological factors. The cultural element is considered to have a major influence on the consumer (Kotler & Keller, 2006). Schiffman and Kanuk (2000) define culture in the context of consumer behavior as "the sum total of learned beliefs, values, and customs that serve to direct the consumption behavior of members of a given society." To understand consumption, it is necessary to know how culture builds experience in everyday life (Verhoef et al., 2009; Kim & Ko, 2012; Trevinal & Stenger, 2014).

The phenomenon of consumption has been investigated from a paradigm shift, from an eminently econometric or cognitive psychological approach to a new approach called Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). By proposing CCT, Arnould and Thompson (2005) referred to research with theoretical perspectives that sought to elucidate the relationship dynamics between consumer actions, the market and cultural meanings (Pinto & Lara, 2011). Arnould and Thompson (2018) suggest that CCT research includes four heuristic categories: (1) Consumer identity projects; (2) Marketplace cultures; (3) Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies; and, (4) The socio-historical patterning of consumption. In general, CCT has advanced knowledge on consumer behavior, despite the fact that the theoretical approach adopted by the authors is geared towards the analysis of socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption. However, there is still much room for discussion and contextual research that takes into account individual social, cultural and historical construction (Abdalla & Brito, 2016).

## 2. AIMS

This study aims to expand the knowledge on consumer subjective experiences and values in SCs, by assessing and characterizing those experiences and values behind them. The cultural context is described as medium towns in northeast Brazil<sup>1</sup>. The purpose is to provide an innovative marketing insight about the role of cultural values and realities in the SC consumer's experiences towards a future development and validation of a consumer's experience scale culturally adjusted. Thus, to explore and better understand the cultural dimensionality of consumer's experiences and values in a context and reality of the shopping centers of inland towns in the Brazilian Northeast region.

## 3. METHOD

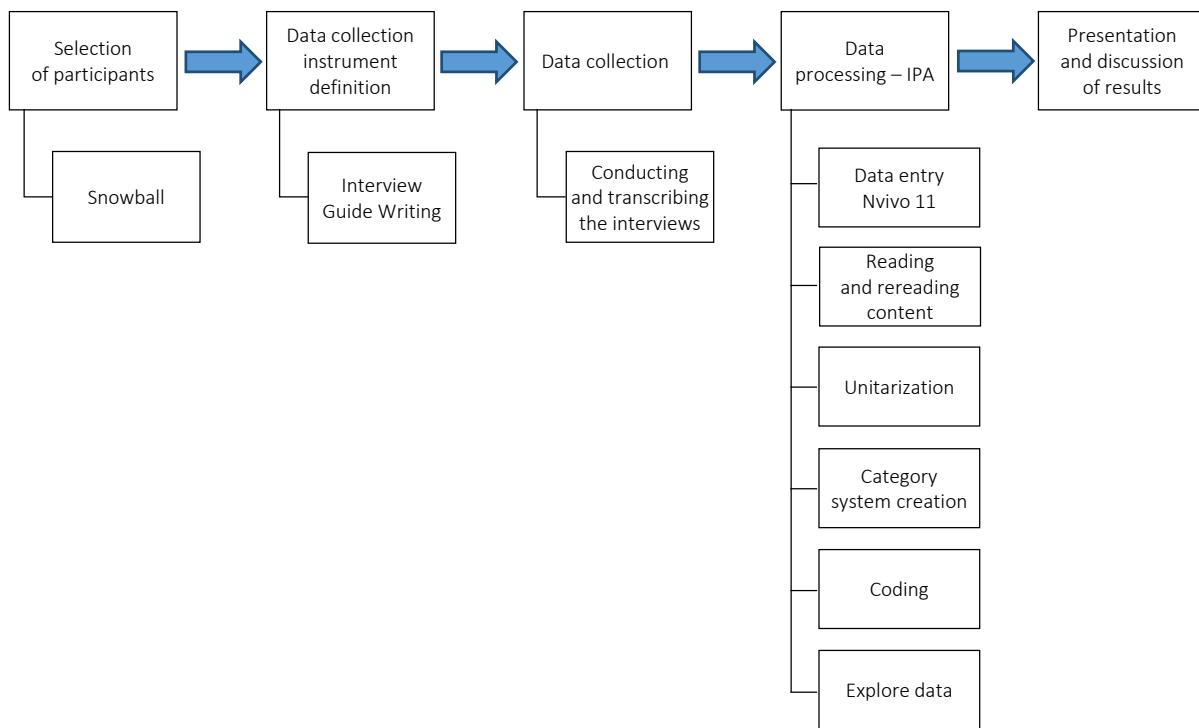
### 3.1. Research design, participants and procedure

The study was carried out with the purpose of characterizing the subjective experience of SCs visitors through identification and description of their perceived values. It followed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach (Amatuzzi, 1996, 2001; Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 1985; Smith & Osborn 2007; Smith et al., 2009). That qualitative approach allows the derivation of general or universal meanings, the "essences" or structures of experiences (Holanda, 2006). The research design is summarized in Figure 1.

The sample was defined according to non-probabilistic representativeness criteria and convenience. However, a secondary criterion was also considered, the relatively recent experience with the phenomenon studied (Polkinghorne, 1989; Carvalho & Vergara 2002; Creswell, 1998). The first-round participants were adults (over 18 years), of both genders, going regularly to SCs (at least once a month).

The number of interviews was decided based on the Theoretical Saturation Criterion. Therefore, the

<sup>1</sup> The towns located in the north-eastern Brazil, with a population between 200 thousand and 500 thousand, are an emerging market niche worthy of investigation, as it posses well-defined characteristics and an interesting and representative universe. Firstly, it is worth mentioning the intensification of new ventures outside Brazilian capitals. In 2017, 43% of all Shopping Centres in Brazil are concentrated in towns with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants (ABRASCE, 2017). Secondly, the Brazilian Northeast region had the second-best performance in terms of sales revenue in SCs, with R\$ 28.6 billion in 2017. The data point towards an increasing number of SCs in inland Brazil. In 2017, nine of the twelve inaugurations occurred outside the capitals (ABRASCE, 2018).



**Figure 1.** Research design

recruitment of new participants stopped once six consecutive interviews generated only redundant content with previous interviews. The Snowball Sampling Procedure was adopted (Baldin & Munhoz, 2011). Sample selection started with the determination of some participants, named “seeds”, in each of the three municipalities under study within the researcher’s network. Gender and age were balanced. Of the 58 respondents, 50 met the criterion of going to SC at least once per month. Data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews. A script was prepared with the starting guiding question: “What does a “shopping center experience” mean to you? Tell me about your experiences”. Following the IPA Methodological Assumptions, the interviews focused on the participants’ experiences.

The interviews were held in March and April 2017 according to the participants’ convenience and the interviewer’s availability. The guiding question was asked at the beginning of the interviews and the interviewer made minimal comments to avoid inducing thoughts and visions in the participant. Twenty-five interviews (50%) with each gender were considered valid. The audio recordings were transcribed fully. In general, participants described their experiences freely and in very differ-

ent ways. This led to a greater richness of data and subsequent complexity of data analysis.

### 3.2. Data analysis

QSR International NVivo 11 software (QSR International, Doncaster, Victoria, Australia) was used for data analysis. Other authors have demonstrated its usefulness in market research (e.g., Wilk et al., 2019). The transcript of the interviews was transferred to NVivo 11. With the empirical data available, the aim was to immerse in the world described by the interviewees, seeking to observe the phenomenon as it was experienced.

After familiarization with the contents following the interviewees’ experiences, core concepts were identified. The analysis was based on hermeneutic reflection, which consists of the interpretation of data and research texts as a dynamic movement towards better understanding of the phenomenon studied (Casotti, 1999). Both researchers participated in defining these core contents, and when there was disagreement, the point was discussed until a consensus was reached.

To achieve the general dynamics of the phenomenon observed and to present the most reliable

material possible for the essence of the individual experiences, data were grouped according to: (1) patterns that follow the terms used by respondents; (2) patterns that emerge from coincidences observed in the text (Thompson et al., 1989; Prus, 1991; Moustakas, 1994). Whenever several sentences gave a description of the same meaning, they were grouped and coded together to make a single reference. Therefore, unitization was performed flexibly. Each reference was as short as possible as long as it conveyed a complete meaning. Through thematic analyses provided by the coding process, structures common to the particular experience were identified to optimize interpretation of the data. A re-reading was carried out to consolidate the concepts created, and two major superordinate categories emerged. Finally, data were coded at three levels of subcategories (nodes): 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> order subcategories.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The categories of SC experiences that emerged from the data were: (1) *Unpleasant experience*, referring to the concept of discontent or displeasure from being without pleasure; and (2) *Pleasant experience*, concerning the concept of delight or pleasure. From the above categories (superordinate categories), 1<sup>st</sup> order categories were derived, and in some cases 2<sup>nd</sup> order and 3<sup>rd</sup> order categories.

The superordinate category 1, *Unpleasant Experience*, was formed by nine 1st order subcategories: *Excess of people*; *Suffocation*; *Consumerism*; *Expensive*; *Information overload*; *General displeasure*; *Inadequate lighting*; *Obligation*; and *Discrimination*. Also, the meanings attributed by the interviewees is described.

*Excess of people* concerns a large number of people present in the SC, generating rush, noise and disorder. *Suffocation* concerns feeling trapped. *Consumerism* denotes the feeling of too much consumption without real need. *Expensive* refers to prices higher than the real value. *Information overload* refers to the visual, noise (or appealing to other senses) ‘pollution’ in the SC that causes discomfort, preventing people from processing the various types of information correctly. *General displeas-*

*ure* is displeasure for general or infrequent reasons. *Inadequate lighting* refers to poor lighting or too much lighting. *Obligation* concerns the feeling of being obliged. *Discrimination* refers to feeling apart from a social group, segregated, a victim of prejudice.

The *excess of people* subcategory was the only 1<sup>st</sup> order one that presented 2<sup>nd</sup> order subcategories, namely: *impatience* (including hunger); *irritation* (state of stress, nervousness, and neurasthenia); *noise* (excessive noise creating discomfort); *agitation* (feeling of torment, tumult); *willingness to leave* (immediate desire to leave the environment due to an unpleasant experience); and *agony* (feeling distressed, and disturbed).

Table 1 shows the subcategories of the Superordinate Unpleasant Experience and the corresponding number of interviewees who mentioned content, which was coded accordingly.

**Table 1.** Subcategories of Unpleasant Experience

First order categories	Second order categories
	Impatience (19)
	Irritation (19)
	Noise (14)
	Agitation (14)
Excess of people (19)	Willingness to leave (14)
	Agony (03)
Suffocation (11)	
Consumerism (10)	
Expensive (08)	
General displeasure (6)	
Information overload (04)	
Inadequate lighting (03)	
Obligation (03)	
Discrimination (02)	

The superordinate Category 2 – *Pleasant Experience* – has a larger and more complex structure, since 13 first-order subcategories were identified: *functionality*; *sensory*; *refuge*; *social interaction*; *greed for the new*; *happiness*; *exploration*; *abstraction*; *seduction*; *economic opportunity*; *fun*; *status*; and *learning*.

According to the interviewees, *functionality* is seen as the state of what has a specific purpose, applicability, utility, and function. *Sensory* is the process by which an external stimulus triggers a sensory reaction. *Refuge* is seen as a retreat, a shelter, a place one seeks either to be welcomed or to es-

**Table 2.** Subcategories of Pleasant Experience

First order categories	Second order categories	Third order categories
Functionality (43)	Convenience (28) Objectivity (25) Comfort (22) Routine facilitator (12)	Complementarity (19) Diversity (15) Variety (13) Focus (15) Speed (10) Safety (13) Mobility (11) Schedule (6) Organization (8) Pending resolution (7)
Sensory (33)	Thermal comfort (26) Eyesight (19) Tact (3) Smell (1)	
Refuge (30)	Routine breakout (29)	Tranquility (16) Fading (15) Relaxation (8) Renovation (5)
	Hobby (8) Pamper yourself (6) Solitude remedy (4) Relief (3)	
Social Interaction (28)	Socialization (28)	Meeting with friends (14) Occasional reencounters (12) Professional encounters (2)
	Relational capacity (8) Intimacy (3)	
Greed for the new (26)	Euphoria (12) Excitement (12) Surprise (9) Anxiety (5)	
Happiness (25)	Welfare (21) Joy (17)	
Exploration (23)	Curiosity (18) Observe (13)	People watching (11) Observation of environmental elements (9)
Abstraction (22)	Distraction (19) Introspection (6)	
Seduction (21)	Magnetism (15) Glam (6) Fantasy (4) Promotion (10)	
Economic Opportunity (19)	Price search (7) Time saving (4) Negotiation (1)	
Fun (10)		
Status (7)	Recognition (6)	
Learning (4)	Appreciation (2)	

cape. *Social interaction* concerns the relationships and/or actions that take place between individuals or groups. *Greed for the new* concerns the intense need for novelty, a great desire to access the new, to feel up-to-date with the latest trends. *Happiness* refers to the state of joy, fullness, and satisfaction.

*Exploration* is understood as the action of seeking, peering, and speculating. *Abstraction* concerns oblivion from the outside world. *Seduction* refers to attraction, charm, and temptation. *Economic opportunity* refers to the possibility of saving money due to paying low prices or saving time due to

fast shopping. *Fun* refers to having fun. *Status* is an advantageous position a person occupies in society with regard to consideration, or prestige. *Learning* is perceived as the condition of understanding, grasping, interpreting, perceiving, knowledge and/or skills development through observation.

Table 2 shows that the structure of *Pleasant Experience* –superordinate category is larger and more complex, as 13 first-order, 35 second-order and 19 third-order categories were identified.

After creating the category system, relationships between subcategories were explored to reach a deeper understanding of the data. Three coding matrices were elaborated in NVivo11, enabling deeper exploration of data in themes and/or respondent profiles, namely: (1) coding matrix “Pleasant and unpleasant experiences in each interview”; (2) coding matrix “Purpose of Shopping Centre visit and positive or negative experiences”; (3) coding matrix “frequency of Shopping Centre visits and positive or negative experiences perceived by shoppers.

Analysis of the summary of the first matrix (Table 3), “Pleasant and unpleasant experiences in each interview” presents ambivalence in relation to the experiences reported by some participants. For the purposes of this study, ambivalence is understood as the simultaneous presence of positive and negative experiences. Among the 50 participants, 23 showed ambivalent experiences, sometimes referring to their experiences in SCs as pleasant and sometimes as unpleasant. In the set of individuals who demonstrated ambivalence, 14 were male and nine were female.

The complexity expressed by this group of people, regarding their SC experiences, is likely to be greater than that of people who describe their SC experiences only positively or only negatively. The group of individuals who only feel aversive experiences was composed of three people (who referred to their SC experiences as only unpleasant), all of them female. There was no record of male positioning in this group. The group that expresses only positive emotions regarding their SC experiences contains 24 people, 11 males and 13 females. These results may suggest the existence of a general level of acceptance of SCs, even if in almost all cases some unpleasant experiences associated with the positive ones were described.

**Table 3.** Pleasant and unpleasant experiences in each interview (number of words)

Interviews	Unpleasant Experience	Pleasant Experience
24 interviews only pleasant experience	0	7388
3 interviews only unpleasant experience	323	0
23 interviews both pleasant and unpleasant experiences	2242	5182
Total	2565	12570

Analysis of Table 3 leads to the conclusion that customers describe SC experiences as predominantly enjoyable. This statement is reinforced since 47 individuals (using 12,570 words), out of 50, made statements referring to their experience as pleasant, while only 26 individuals (using 2,565 words) reported their experiences as being unpleasant. These numbers confirm that unpleasant experiences are less common.

Although exhaustive analysis of each value expressed in the category system was not the objective of the research, it was decided to observe the predominant attributes in each of the above categories. The category of *Pleasant Experience* adds the values that directly contribute to the sense of pleasure felt by individuals in their SC experiences. Values have a positive relationship with experience. Here, predominance of *functionality* was observed, being reported by 43 participants. This category values elements such as convenience and practicality. It presents the diversity of services available in the SC as very useful for efficient management of daily life.

The superordinate category of *Unpleasant Experience* brings together the elements that can be considered as devaluations. Devaluation, for the purpose of this study, is considered as any component that, directly or indirectly, contributes to a feeling of discontent in individuals during their SC experiences. Thus, it assumes a negative undesirable character. While the first category has an attractive character, the second category has an aversive character, which refers to avoidance.

As the predominant devaluation, *excess of people*, reported by 19 interviewees, is highlighted. Considering that almost half the respondents reported this devaluation, this raises concern.

**Table 4.** Purpose of Shopping Centre visit and positive or negative experiences (number of participants)

Experience	Values	Objective			
		Go shopping	Leisure	Services	None
Unpleasant experience	Expensive	6	6	6	2
	Suffocation	8	6	8	0
	Consumerism	7	6	8	0
	General displeasure	6	4	5	0
	Discrimination	0	1	2	0
	Information overload	3	3	3	0
	Excess of people	12	11	14	3
	Inadequate lightening	3	2	2	0
Pleasant experience	Obligation	3	0	2	1
	Abstraction	19	22	13	5
	Learning	4	4	2	1
	Greed for the new	22	25	14	6
	Fun	9	10	6	4
	Exploration	20	23	14	5
	Happiness	23	23	14	5
	Social interaction	25	27	20	8
	Economic opportunity	18	16	13	2
	Functionality	35	36	32	9
	Refuge	26	29	19	7
	Seduction	17	21	12	4
	Sensorial	26	27	26	8
	Status	7	7	5	2

**Table 5.** Hierarchy of customers' perceived values and objectives of going to the SC (number of participants)

1st order categories	Purchase goal	Ranking	Leisure goal	Ranking	Services goal	Ranking	No purpose	Ranking
Functionality	35	1	36	1	32	1	9	1
Interaction	25	3	27	3	20	3	8	2
Sensory	26	2	27	3	26	2	8	2
Refuge	26	2	29	2			7	3

Apparently, this problem deserves further investigation regarding SC management. On the one hand, organizations make efforts to attract large numbers of people, and the more effective they are in doing so, the closer they come to an unwanted effect – devaluation, which causes aversion and avoidance in customers.

Participants who mentioned excessive numbers of people associate this with feelings of irritation, impatience, noise, rush, agony and the desire to leave. These experiences were reported in days of regular footfall, when SC movement could be considered as having no significant changes. In terms of practical implications, these results may highlight the importance of strategies to minimize devaluation and avoidance to overcome the negative side effects resulting from efficiency in attracting people.

The second matrix analyzed concerns the intersection between the “objective of the SC visit” and “experiences/values by shoppers” (1<sup>st</sup> order categories of pleasant and unpleasant experience). The results show that, in general, devaluations (aversive elements) and values (attractive elements) are not directly associated with the goals that led individuals to the SC, since those emerge independently (Table 4). This is relevant as it appears to be counter-intuitive in some way. In terms of practical implications, it indicates that strategies for dealing with the values and devaluations perceived by customers need not be sensitive to the goals that motivate individuals to visit SC.

However, it is important to understand the “hierarchy” of the values perceived and considered by each group, as they may point out interesting

characteristics about how they experience SCs. Table 5 presents a synthesis that includes the values considered most relevant in relation to each customer objective based on the number of participants who meet the criterion.

Four values were considered to be the most relevant by the four groups (goals: shopping, leisure, services, and no purpose), i.e., reported by the largest number of participants. The group of individuals whose visits to the SC were to make purchases perceived *functionality* as the most relevant value. Secondly, with the same importance, *sensory* and *refuge* were considered. In third position, 25 participants mentioned that they sought interaction with others. The group of people who attend SCs to enjoy leisure time chose as their main values the same values identified by the group aiming to shop: firstly, *functionality* (36), secondly, *refuge* (29), and tied in third place were *sensory* values (27) and *social interaction* (27). As observed, the only distinction between these groups is in the positioning of the *sensory* value. The group whose purpose of visiting the SC is to use the services provided also showed values appearing in the previously mentioned groups, considering *functionality* (32) as the most important value, followed by *sensory* (26) and *social interaction* (20).

Regarding individuals who claimed to visit the SC without any pre-established purpose, it was considered they might make this statement because they experience greater difficulty in understanding and interpreting their internal processes. Thus, the results found might not deserve special attention, given that this group ultimately includes itself in at least one of the other groups. This explanation is reinforced by the fact that the values considered as most relevant by this group of respondents are similar to the values of the other groups: first, *functionality* (9), second, *social interaction* (8) and *sensory* (8) and third, *refuge* (7). In addition, participants who claim to go to SCs sometimes without any purpose also say that at other times they have some specific purpose.

Since the values of major importance were the same for the four groups, a certain homogeneity is observed. Differentiation among the groups is seen mainly in the hierarchical order of the values. *Functionality* was considered the most relevant value by people who visit SCs regardless of their purpose in going there.

*Functionality* was positioned as the most relevant even by the group of people whose goal in going to SC is leisure. This is noteworthy since leisure is usually related to rest, which excludes not only work obligations but also the time spent fulfilling daily routines. This result seems contradictory, since functionality tends to be associated with efficiency, and leisure – with enjoyment. However, it reveals that individuals, even in leisure situations, aim predominantly at functionality, which enables them to enjoy leisure without losing the sense and importance of practicality. It should be reinforced that all respondents who aim for leisure when going to the SC also seek this goal. This underlines the importance of further studies going deeper into the subtleties of how different values vary and combine in the same person.

For the group that goes to the SC for leisure purposes, *refuge* was indicated as the second most important. It appears that leisure, for these people, can assume a meaning associated with the need to find a cozy place to be welcomed and/or to make them feel free / relieved from the pressures of daily life. Once again, a practical implication is pointed out: *excess of people*, mentioned above, may render *refuge* inoperable. Individuals with expectations of seeking refuge who face the hassle of overcrowding may experience frustration.

Thus, good management and good planning of an SC cannot be measured linearly through its ability to attract more and more customers. Firstly, there must be an optimal number of customers. Secondly, the design of SCs should take into account consumers' need for *refuge*, whilst encouraging a high number of shoppers to strengthen business results.

The third matrix explored in the present study relates the factors of "frequency of SC visits" and "values perceived by shoppers" (first-order categories of the two superordinate: *Pleasant and Unpleasant Experience*). Analysis led to the conclusion that individuals who visit SC a lot, in this case including the groups of "average frequency of 6 to 8 times a month" and "average above 9 times a month", tend not to consider the negative aspects of their visits to the SC (Table 6). Only 20 participants (out of 50) who visit the SC frequently cited any negative aspect. Out of the nine possible, the following negative aspects were mentioned: *ex-*

**Table 6.** Frequency and values (number of participants)

Experience	Values	Frequency			
		2 per month	3 to 5 per month	6 to 8 per month	9 or higher per month
Unpleasant experience	Expensive	5	1	0	2
	Suffocation	5	4	0	0
	Consumerism	2	6	1	0
	General displeasure	2	1	1	1
	Discrimination	1	1	0	0
	Information overload	2	2	0	0
	Excess of people	7	8	0	2
	Inadequate lighting	2	1	0	0
	Obligation	2	1	0	0
	Abstraction	4	7	6	5
Pleasant experience	Learning	1	1	0	2
	Greed for the new	5	7	6	8
	Fun	0	2	3	5
	Exploring	4	5	6	8
	Happiness	5	7	6	7
	Functionality	10	11	9	11
	Social interaction	5	5	8	9
	Economic opportunity	6	2	4	6
	Refuge	5	10	7	8
	Seduction	4	5	6	6
	Sensorial	9	9	5	9
	Status	0	2	2	3

cess of people (2), scarcity (2) consumerism (1) and general displeasure (1). Thus, there is a strong predominance of pleasure values over negative values.

The group of participants, who go to SCs on average only twice a month, was considered as the group with the lowest number of visits. This group tends to perceive both the positive and negative aspects, in a balanced way of ambivalence, and is composed of 12 participants (out of 50). Analysis of the data for this group highlighted that two values are considered of no relevance since there was no corresponding mention. These were *fun* and *status*.

The group whose average frequency of visits is between 3 and 5 times a month visited the SC in a moderate way. This group seemed to alternate or match the characteristics of the two above-mentioned groups (high frequency and low frequency). In summary, between the frequency of SC visits and the perception of positive and negative val-

ues by customers, the following relationship is observed: the more frequently customers go to SCs, the less they seem to perceive the negative values. The less frequently customers go to SCs, the more they perceive negative values. *Functionality* and *sensory* values are present in all groups with similar intensity. Thus, analysis of the values identified as relevant may lead to better understanding and characterization of the ways in which SCs enable or trigger consumers' positive and negative experiences.

These results are in line with Farrag et al. (2010) and Khare (2011), who found that SC experiences and consumer behavior are strongly influenced by the local culture. Kuruvilla and Joshi (2010) and Kuruvilla et al. (2009) in their studies in India underline the importance of understanding consumers within their specific culture. Compared to other previous studies (Cardoso & Pinto, 2010; Gilboa et al., 2016; El-Adly & Eid, 2017) it is confirmed that functionality is a cross value.

## CONCLUSION

The study confirms that cultural dimensions, particularly the local culture, have a relevant influence on consumer behavior. The values identified in the SC experiences have different configurations from the values raised in other similar studies made in different cultural backgrounds. These distinctions could influence core segmentation criterion in business strategies despite functionality is a cross value independent of the cultural framework. Therefore, the results suggest that value can be considered universal regardless of the cultural framework.

Concerning other dimensions, namely the hedonic one, that similarity is not present, which highlights the importance of taking cultural diversity into account when studying the global phenomenon of SCs.

This research contributes to the experiential marketing literature by highlighting the importance of cultural contexts in consumer experiences and behavior research. This can be a way to establish an understanding of the dimensions and values related to consumer experience in both its specific and universal aspects. In addition, it may contribute to creating effective SCs marketing strategies. Further highlights the importance of both the social policy makers and the SCs managers to base and/or adapt their decisions on cultural contexts.

## MARKETING PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

This study has practical contributions, as it presents new knowledge that may contribute to the design of strategies for SC management. Examples of unprecedented knowledge include the findings that (a) functionality is considered the most relevant value, regardless of the frequency of visits and even the objectives leading customers to visit the SC; (b) excess of people is the most frequent disvalue among customers; and (c) for the group who attends the SC for leisure purposes, refuge is the second most important, and apparently leisure for these people can be associated with needing a welcoming, cozy place and relief from the pressures of daily life. For them, excess of people disvalue goes against their refuge value. Therefore, SC management performance cannot be measured without considering that an increasing number of consumers reflect on an emerging increasing excess of people disvalue. Finding the optimal number of consumers can in fact be the correct challenge to pursue, instead of simply aiming for more and more consumers. Another management option can be to design SCs to meet both contrary forces: the value of refuge in some spaces, and at the same time other areas for the crowd. This would make it possible to reach the target in terms of the number of consumers necessary to assure economic sustainability.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

Potential areas for future research are aimed to deepen knowledge of the values and intra-cultural diversity emerged, considering that SC customers base their perceptions of value in their experiences in very distinct ways.

Extension of research could involve the study of the values underlying SC experiences in more towns and regions. Moreover, a structured quantitative approach could be used to enrich the understanding and map intra-cultural diversity, while allowing extensive comparison with other cultures. A more comprehensive understanding of the cultural dimensionality of consumer experiences and perceived values in consumption experiences may also shed light to develop and validate a consumer experience scale culturally adjusted.

Furthermore, clustering SC consumers according to their similar values can lead us to the design of a typology comparable to others highlighting similarities and differences with greater accuracy (Farrag et. al., 2010; El-Adly & Eid, 2015; Lucia-Palacios et al., 2016; Gilboa et al., 2016; El-Adly & Eid, 2017). That is a good challenge for future research.

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