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The amaz(e)ing brand experience: Exploring the impact of a maze-like store layout on brand experience

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to investigate the concepts of brand experience in relation to companies' use of a maze-like in-store floor plan.

Aim: To explore if the maze-like store structure affects the four dimensions of brand experience.

Methodology/Approach: This study was carried out using secondary and primary research. The secondary research consists of a comprehensive review on existing literature on the chosen topic. The primary research was conducted using a self-completion questionnaire.

Findings: The paper finds that a maze-like structure affects the brand experience by activating its four dimensions. Next, it shows the dependency of the maze on the specific brand utilising the layout. Lastly, our study indicates that some dimensions are easier to measure than others.

Originality/value: This paper is the first of its kind to examine the relationship between labyrinthine in-store layouts and brand experience.

Keywords: brand experience, experience economy, experiential retail, architecture, maze, layout, labyrinth

Paper type: Journal Article

Introduction

Brands are becoming exceptionally multifaceted. They can be developed, strategized, and made a source of profit for companies. One of those facets is the brand experience. While brand experience can encompass many different aspects, the in-store layout is of particular interest in this study. Consumers may not pay close attention to their favourite brand's store structure, yet it is a key factor influencing the brand experience. In fact, the use of architecture as a branding device is exemplified by any retail store, from the sleek, minimalist and modern showrooms of Apple, to the dark, perfume-filled rooms of Hollister. Every single element is meticulously planned to the very

last detail. For decades now, all kinds of retail stores have utilised specific designs and layouts to manage and influence not only the shopping experiences, but also the brand experiences in very specific ways. Consequently, numerous scholars have studied the relationship between architecture and brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Khan & Rahman, 2015). While there is an abundance of literature exploring the relationship between the two aforementioned topics, there is a lack in literature focusing on the different types of architecture, specifically a maze-like layout. Such a layout is employed by the likes of IKEA, Flying Tiger, Normal and more. Evidently, this type of layout is growing in popularity as more and more companies are adopting it,

therefore it is very relevant for today's managers. We argue that the research will help brands understand the wants and needs of today's consumers in regards to the layout as a factor in their brand experience. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of a maze-like store layout on brand experience.

Literature Review

Experiential Retail/Shopping

Retail sector has seen a shift toward experiential shopping due to many reasons such as globalisation, consumer consciousness in decision-making, technological advancements, etc. (Krafft and Mantrala, 2006). In the late 90's, Pine and Gilmore (1998) discussed how the service industry was undergoing the change from selling services to selling experiences. They described this phenomenon as intentional use of services that allow for the direct participation of consumers in creating unforgettable experiences. Specifically, they mentioned that the idea of selling experiences extends beyond amusement parks and movie theatres to retail stores (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In fact, experiential retail appears to be a new source of competitive advantage, and a unique factor in defining the company's brand experience (Khan & Rahman, 2016). This is due to the fact that customers nowadays purchase products for their product brand value, as well as for the experiential value delivered by the retail brand (Mathwick et al., 2001). Consequently, retail stores are putting more and more effort into providing positive and unique shopping experiences for their consumers.

In the context of stores like Normal, Flying Tiger and IKEA, experiential shopping is built around the experience of guiding the consumers throughout each part of the store, exposing them to every product they have to offer. Particularly, at IKEA consumers are

guided through all the rooms one may have in their home and offered the chance to see the products in rooms in the hopes of inspiring consumers' purchasing decisions. As an early adopter of the maze-like layout, IKEA has distinguished itself within its industry by "*positioning itself as an experience store*" (Rodrigues & Brandão, 2020). Evidently, a unique in-store experience provides a unique positioning to use in the development of a firm's competitive advantage.

Gruen Effect

For many decades, strategic tactics have been employed in influencing consumers' buying behaviour and in-store experience. One particular architect, Victor Gruen, became known for his tactical designs in developing the layouts of American shopping malls. His mastery became known as the 'Gruen Effect' (Byun, 2021). While many stores utilise these architectural tactics in shaping consumers' brand experiences, IKEA most notably has mastered the Gruen Effect in its maze-like store layout. Following the example of IKEA, other companies, such as Flying Tiger, Normal and Søstrene Grene, have adopted this specific store layout in order to increase impulse buys, keep customers in store for a longer period of time, and encourage customers to explore the whole product range, all of which shape a unique brand experience.

Brand-building Through Architecture

The Gruen Effect is just one example of how store design can influence building the brand. Store layout and design not only influence consumer behaviour but also the perception of the brand as a whole, which applies to the concept of store-as-a-brand (Floor, 2007). Not only does it require retailers to take care of the quality of the product but also of the customer's experience during the purchase. For instance, Burt and Davies (2010) have demonstrated in their

study that a single-brand apparel retailer needs to create and maintain a consistent image of the store and the brand, as the two are very dependent on each other. If consumers, however, notice an inconsistency between the brand and the store image, they will avoid it (Burt & Davies, 2010).

Building a brand image through shop architecture has many facets. The architecture and appearance of the entire building, the design, colour scheme, and lighting inside, as well as the layout of the products and the store layout, are all considerably important (Kim & Kumar, 2014).

Store Architecture and Brand Architecture

Brands, especially those with heritage, can portray their values and build an image of longevity through the architectural design of their buildings (Bargenda, 2023). Prada's Epicentres is an example of this. These are special locations that merge fashion, architecture, and technology. Prada's Epicentres are a place not only for shopping but also for different cultural events (Masè & Silchenko, 2017). Through the Epicentres, Prada is building its image as a brand that is timeless, unique, exclusive, and not just focused on the fashion world. Via its Epicentres, Prada creates a unique experience for its customers and builds new channels of outreach between the brand and its customers (Masè & Silchenko, 2017). Prada's Epicentres are a direct demonstration of how physical architecture can replicate the architecture of a brand, combining heritage and modernity.

In-store design can be closely related to the values of the brand and the image it wants to create. This is the approach taken, for example, by The Body Shop. The design of the stores was based on the organisation's values, focusing on a sense of environmental responsibility. The Body Shop faced criticism that the design of their interiors

was becoming outdated, but even after its rebranding, the architecture of their spaces aimed to illustrate the company's values (Kent & Stone, 2007).

Store Layout

The literature indicates a strong relationship between store architecture and branding. The main objective of this paper, however, is to analyse if the store layout, specifically the maze-like structure, has an impact on brand experience. The case of IKEA, which wanted to apply a different strategy to its smaller downtown stores, may indicate a strong link between them. The Swedish company wanted to turn away from maze-like structures in its downtown shops, but it soon became clear that the new direction did not appeal to customers, and IKEA closed some of those stores in Madrid, Shanghai, and Warsaw. According to Tolga Öncü, retail director at Ingka Group, who operates the majority of IKEA shops, customer interviews and feedback surveys showed that many customers wanted guidance and a different store layout (Deighton, 2023)

Consequently the arrangement of shelves in a store is of great importance as it exerts influence on a consumer's in-store behaviour. The most commonly utilised layouts are the following:

The Counter Store: This layout is used in stores in which all sales transactions take place at the counter, such as in pharmacies. This layout allows no self-service.

The Grid: It is characterised by a parallel arrangement of aisles, typically used in supermarkets and drugstores.

The Loop: A path navigates customers around the store from the entrance to the checkout.

The Free Form Layout: The aisles are arranged asymmetrically, often using a combination of the above mentioned alternative layouts.

The Forced Path Layout/the Maze: A labyrinth-/maze-associated path that customers are obliged to follow to reach the check-out is the characteristic of this layout. Some stores include shortcuts to permit customers to exit the maze (Ebster & Garaus, 2011). In this paper, we focus on this layout.

The effect of a labyrinth on the human brain has been studied by researchers. It was revealed that engaging in the labyrinth's completion process occupies the logical and analytical aspect of our minds, freeing up space for our creative part of the brain to flourish (University of Winchester, 2019). This, in turn, opens up opportunities for novel viewpoints and problem-solving. Furthermore, labyrinths can serve as a resource to stimulate creativity (Irving, 2017), address challenges, and facilitate decision-making (University of Winchester, 2019).

Brand Experience

As customers explore, purchase, or consume brands, they are exposed to an abundance of stimuli that are closely associated with a brand and its identity. Among others, these include the colours, fonts, contours, logotypes and claims as well as the channels used to market (e.g. magazines, advertisements) and sell (e.g. physical stores, online shops) a product or service. These stimuli arouse certain responses in customers that can be referred to as "brand experience". The concept of brand experience has only in the past few decades been discussed in academic literature. The most widely used definition of the concept was provided by Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009, p.53), who define brand experiences as

"subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments".

Ambler et al. (2002) define brand experiences as the result of using a brand, engaging in conversations with others about it, and actively searching for brand-related information, as well as promotions, and events.

The definition of Brakus et al. (2009) and their research serve as one of the most significant milestones in the study of the topic. In their study, they explored the experience concept within different paradigms, one of which was shopping service experience. They described the idea taking place when *"a consumer interacts with a store's physical environment, its personnel, and its policies and practices"* (Brakus et al., 2009, p.53).

The concept of retail brand experience has only been discussed and researched in a limited capacity (Khan and Rahman, 2016). The term was first coined recently by Khan and Rahman (2015, p.62), who also provided a definition of the topic:

"the sum total of sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by retail brand-related stimuli during complete buying process, involving an integrated series of interactions with retail store design, service interface, packaging of own private labels, communications, and environments".

Based on the definition by Brakus et al. (2009), the latter by Khan and Rahman (2015) refers to the holistic experience

consumers have, when interacting with a retail brand throughout the entire buying process.

Dimensions of Brand Experience

Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) distinguish between four different dimensions of brand experience: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural. While the sensory dimension refers to a human's senses (olfactory, visual, tactile, auditory, gustatory), the affective one relates to the emotional response evoked by a certain element of a brand for instance by the colours of the logotype or a slogan. The intellectual facet adverts to the way in which cognition is stimulated and lastly, the behavioural dimension looks at the brand triggered actions and behaviours of a consumer. This distinction is partly based on the five strategic experiential modules (SEM) by Bernd H. Schmitt (1999): sense, feel, think, act, relate. Schmitt (1999) refers to these modules as a tool for marketing practitioners in order to constitute variable customer experiences. The sense SEM, which corresponds to Brakus et al. (2009) sensory dimension, alludes to the engagement of senses with the aim of crafting sensory experiences by encompassing sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound. The essence of feel marketing, corresponding to the affective dimension (Brakus et al., 2009), treats the emotional linkage between customers and a brand. Sparking consumers cognitive abilities and problem-solving is for instance achieved by provoking or surprising clients. This is the objective of the think module, corresponding to the intellectual dimension (ibid). "Act" can best be described by using Nike's slogan "Just do it" (Nike, 2023). It induces physical behaviour, changes in lifestyle and motor actions, which corresponds to the behavioural dimension (Brakus et al., 2009). The last proposed module "relate" is not manifested in the proposed dimensions by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). It

connotes the reference to other individuals or social groups. Owning a Harley-Davidson goes beyond the possession per se. Users become part of the community (Schmitt, 1999).

A resemblance with Brakus et al. (2009) framework is noted in the conceptualisation of Pine and Gilmore (1999), who identify a sensory/aesthetic, an intellectual/educational and lastly an emotional/entertaining experience dimension. Yet, these facets are confined to retail environments and events.

It is worth noting that a certain stimulus can trigger more than just one of these experience dimensions. A slogan for instance, can provoke emotions (affective dimension), and simultaneously instigate an action (behavioural dimension). These types of brand experiences can occur irrespectively of the degree of interest or relation a person has with a brand. Brands with which consumers are deeply engaged may not always generate the most powerful experiences, which distinguishes the concept of brand experience from involvement. However, there can be positive and negative experiences, stronger or weaker ones, some may arise spontaneously while others may be more conscious and durable.

As mentioned, brand-related stimuli lead to an evocation of certain feelings and sensations, yet, they are not a simple judgemental evaluation of liking or disliking a brand (Brakus et al., 2009). Considerably, creating a brand experience is beyond a visual engagement in advertisements or other communicational approaches. It revolves around fulfilling a brand promise across all touchpoints (Owren, n.d.).

Measuring Brand Experience

The importance of understanding brand experience has increased throughout the past decades. Marketers see its crucial relevance for creating and rolling out marketing

strategies. Therefore, Brakus et al. (2009) have developed the Brand Experience Scale in order to measure the intensity of the previously mentioned four experience dimensions: sensory, behavioural, intellectual, and affective. In practice, the scale provides a valid tool for assessing, organising and monitoring experiences. It further contributes by demonstrating the direct effect of brand experience on brand loyalty and satisfaction (ibid).

The scale was developed on the basis of six different studies conducted by the authors. In their studies, Brakus et al., (2009) developed the Four Factor Model. For each of the four dimensions of brand experience, 25 to 30 items, in total 130, were collected in a thorough literature review. In several studies these were carefully examined and finally condensed to 12 final items as seen in Figure 1. Several researchers argue that this scale should be taken even further in order to be more retail-specific (Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Jones and Runyan, 2013) by considering additional experiences such as locating the products they desire, engaging with multiple store staff members during their journey, and ultimately, making returns (Dabholkar, Thorpe & Rentz, 1995). However, this gap

remains to be filled.

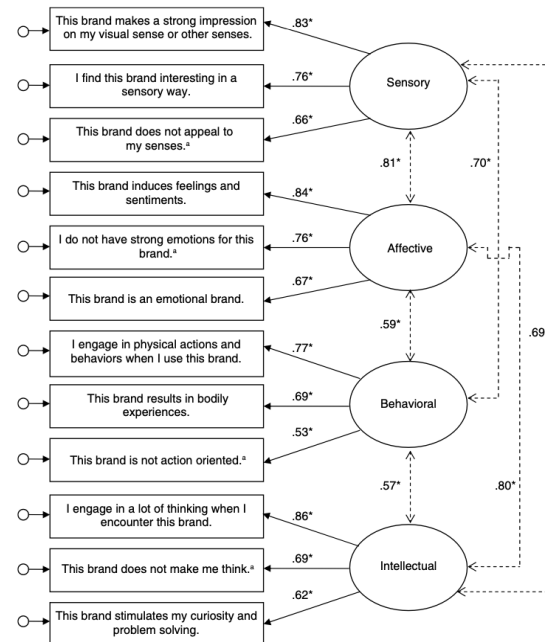


Figure 1: The Four Factor Model (Brakus et al., 2009, p.60)

Methodology

Research Design

This research utilises a quantitative research method, involving the collection of both primary and secondary data. The quantitative research strategy used was in the form of an online self-completed questionnaire with questions using the Likert scale. Since the aim of this research is to study how the maze-like layout of stores impacts consumers' brand experience, the chosen research approach allows for the measuring of attitudes in regards to the chosen topic (Bryman et al., 2019). It is important to mention that the Likert Scale possesses the limitation of the central tendency bias. This is a psychological bias that refers to the respondents' inclination to bypass the endpoints of the scale in favour of the options at the centre of the scale (Douven, 2017). Despite this limitation, Likert scales are advantageous in this research as it transforms qualitative data into numerical

categories (Bryman et al., 2019). Additionally, it was necessary to have a larger sample size in order to comprehensively understand the attitudes of consumers regarding our subject matter which is why we administered a survey with a Likert scale.

Empirical Data Collection

For the primary research, the data was collected with a sample size of 68 participants. The pool of participants consisted of our acquaintances, friends and family members. We aimed to acquire participants from each age group listed on our survey and have a plethora of nationalities to gain a wide-ranging and multinational sample group.

The survey begins by asking the participants' to allocate themselves into an age category, after which they are asked to tell their nationality. The reasoning behind these first questions is to get an overview of the age and nationality of the sample.

The next questions examined whether participants have actively or consciously noticed the labyrinth layout of IKEA, followed by a general inquiry to their attitude regarding the importance of the maze. We wanted to compare IKEA to a smaller store that has also adopted the labyrinth store layout. However, this study is not about the differences in brand experience between different stores, therefore, we did not see it necessary to ask about the participants' liking of the layout of each store that has that particular floor plan.

In the secondary research of this study, we have described the four dimensions, sensory, affective, behavioural and intellectual, of brand experience laid out by Brakus et al. (2009). We set out to explore the effects of the maze-like structure in correlation to the four factors. Each question was carefully designed to inquire about the participants' attitudes regarding the dimensions. The

Four-Factor Model outlines three statements in connection to each dimension, which we used as a guide when designing the Likert scale questions. The Likert Scale was chosen as the main part of our questionnaire for the reason that brand experience, as a concept, is still a broad phenomenon. The Four Factor Model by Brakus et al. (2009) provided an appropriate conceptualisation through which we were able to tangibly measure brand experience.

Empirical Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data from the Likert Scale questions, a scoring was created to quantify the level of agreement and disagreement in correspondence to each dimension. Thereby, we aimed at exploring the degree of activation of the different brand experience dimensions.

Empirical Results

In this section, we will present the results of the survey we conducted. The questionnaire was designed to complement the literature review and to help understand how the maze-like store layout affects the four dimensions of brand experience.

A total of 68 respondents took part in the survey. They represent different age groups, but the majority (80.9%) are between 20 and 29 years old. Furthermore, the respondents are of different nationalities, and most of them (95.5%) come from European countries.

The aim of the first two questions in the survey was to find out whether customers are aware that stores use a maze-like layout and what their general attitude is towards it. In the question on customer consciousness about the maze-like layout, we used the example of IKEA shops, which is probably the most popular brand using this type of layout. The vast majority of respondents (85,3%) answered that they were aware of

the maze-like layout used in IKEA stores. For 4.4% of respondents, this was new information, while 10.3% answered that they were not consciously aware of it before, but at the time of answering this question, they recognised that this was indeed the case. Importantly, none of the respondents answered that they had never been to IKEA stores. In the second question, respondents were asked if it bothers them that in stores such as IKEA, Normal or Flying Tiger they have to walk through the entire store before reaching the checkout. 57.4% of those who took part in the survey said that it did not bother them and they liked the maze-like layout. 35.3% answered that it bothered them, and 7.4% had no opinion on the subject.

The next two questions were about the potential customer reaction if IKEA or Flying Tiger decided to abandon the maze-like layout in their stores. When asked about IKEA, more than half of the respondents (55.9%) would not like such a decision because they like the maze-like layout. Such results correspond with the responses to the question on attitudes to the maze-like layout. It is worth noting, however, that while in the previous question, 35.3% indicated that they were bothered by such a layout, here only 17.6% would like it if it were abandoned in IKEA stores. 26.5% had no opinion on the matter. The results of the same question, however, concerning Flying Tiger shops, are different. In this case, opinions are more divided. 29.4% of those surveyed would like to keep the current layout, while 32.4% would like to get rid of the maze-like layout in the Flying Tiger stores. 38.2% responded that they had no opinion.

In the following questions, the respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements using a five-point Likert scale. Each question was designed to address one

of the four dimensions of brand experience developed by Brakus et al. (2009).

When I am in a store with a maze-like layout (e.g. IKEA and Flying Tiger), I interact (e.g. touch & smell) with the products more than in stores with a different layout.

The majority of respondents agreed (42,6%) or strongly agreed (32,4%) with this statement. The neutral option was chosen by 16,2% of those who took part in the survey, while 7,4% said they disagreed with the above statement and 1,5% said they strongly disagreed.

When I'm in the store, the maze-like layout makes me feel "safely guided" through the store, which I like.

For this statement, the response garnering the highest number of votes was the "disagree" option, which received 30,8% of the votes. Subsequently, the "neutral" alternative emerged as the runner-up, followed by "agree", "strongly agree", and lastly "strongly disagree", the latter securing only a single vote. Notably, in comparison to the other statements, this particular one evoked the highest frequency of neutral responses.

The maze-like structure makes me feel more connected to the brand than in other brands' stores without such a layout.

For this statement, the most frequently chosen option was "agree", with 33,8% of respondents aligning with this view. The "neutral" option emerged as the runner-up for this statement as well, receiving 26,5% of the responses. From those surveyed, 22,0% disagreed with the statement, while 13,2% strongly agreed and only 5,9% strongly disagreed with this assertion.

The maze-like layout makes me stay in the store longer than in stores without such a layout (e.g. with parallel aisles).

This statement elicited the most radical responses, with 57,4% of participants exhibiting strong agreement with the statement. Following that, 30,9% of the respondents were in agreement, while 5,9% remained neutral. Conversely, the “disagree” and “strongly disagree” categories garnered only 2,9% of the votes each.

Walking through the maze-like store layout to get all the way to the check-out I tend to buy more.

In regards to this statement about the respondents’ purchasing behaviour, 30,9% strongly agreed while 44,1% agreed that the maze-like layout causes them to buy more. 16,2% remained neutral, while a more modest count of 5,9% of participants disagreed and only 2,9% strongly disagreed.

I am more curious about the product range in stores with a maze-like layout compared to stores without such a layout.

In the examination of participant responses to this particular statement, it is evident that 38,2% agreed with it, while 11,8% expressed strong agreement. On the other hand, 23,5% of respondents remained neutral about it, and a notable amount of 20,6% disagreed and 5,9% strongly disagreed with the statement.

The stores with a maze-like structure spark my creativity and imagination more than other stores.

The results of this query exhibited a remarkable degree of parity among those surveyed, with 19,1% of the participants indicating strong agreement, followed by 27,9% agreeing, 26,5% remaining neutral and 22,1% choosing the “disagree” option. The only outlier in this were the three respondents who strongly disagreed with the statement. These results demonstrate a clear balance in the distribution of responses, depicting a diverse range of perspectives within the survey participants.

Likert Scale Scoring

In order to explore what impact the maze-like layout has on the four dimensions of brand experience introduced by Brakus et al. (2009), we conducted an in-depth analysis of the questions containing a Likert scale. We assigned a weightage to each response so that we could later aggregate the score for each question, which in turn was linked to one of the four dimensions (Sensory, Affective, Behavioural, Intellectual). We have assumed that responses in which respondents chose the middle option (i.e. neutral) will not be taken into account as they do not affect the final result.

Each response received the following figures:

- Strongly disagree: (-2)
- Disagree: (-1)
- Neutral: (0)
- Agree: (1)
- Strongly agree (2)

Through the analysis carried out in this way, a table was created with the results for each dimension of brand experience to which the specific questions in our survey corresponded. The table can be found in Appendix 1 of this paper. The first question with a Likert scale addressed the sensory dimension, the second and third the affective dimension, the fourth and fifth the behavioural dimension, and the sixth and seventh the intellectual dimension. When the results were added up, the maze-like layout was found to have the greatest impact on the behavioural dimension (78.5) and the sensory dimension (66). The analysis also demonstrated that the other two dimensions - affective (17) and intellectual (22) - were activated, but to a lesser extent by this type of store layout.

Discussion

This section is aimed at discussing the survey’s findings in relation to our reviewed

literature, drawing a focus specifically on the Four-Factor Model framework by Brakus et al. (2009).

In the survey, it has been shown that the vast majority of people are aware of the fact that IKEA uses a maze-like floor plan in its stores or were at least able to recall it while participating in the survey. This finding indicates that the maze store structure is a consciously noticed element of IKEA.

The opinions on this specific layout in stores such as IKEA, Flying Tiger, and Normal diverge. The maze is negatively perceived by more than one third of the respondents, who feel bothered by the forced path. This finding is of great importance as it impacts a customer's in-store experience. However, the results demonstrate that the maze-like layout cannot be judged in isolation of the brand. This has further become apparent after asking the respondents if they wanted to change the maze-like layout. While the majoritarian participants agreed that the maze should be maintained at IKEA, the opinions about Flying Tiger's maze were split with one-third in favour of changing the layout. Predominantly, survey takers responded with indifference and the supporters of the current maze at Flying Tiger were outnumbered. The store structure at Flying Tiger is hence not very well-received.

Interestingly, there were people who claimed to be bothered by a maze-like layout but would nevertheless not be in favour of abandoning the maze at IKEA. In contrast, people who had previously responded that they generally liked the maze-like layout would not mind getting rid of it in Flying Tiger stores. Thus, this implies that the maze is strongly dependent on the specific brand that utilises the maze and may have a more significant role for some than for others.

Sensory Dimension

In fact, the maze influences the degree of interaction with products displayed along the path more than in other floor plans. At IKEA, the layout was originally adopted in order to create a real-life catalogue (Deighton, 2023). Hence, walking through the store is supposed to be similar to thumbing through the catalogue, displaying and experiencing the full assortment. This way the interaction and engagement of one's senses with the displayed goods is encouraged.

Although this is a very limited investigation, it can be asserted that the maze evokes the sensory brand experience facet.

Affective Dimension

When IKEA removed the maze in some of its stores, customers did not perceive it as a positive change. Apparently people were missing the "guiding hand" that led them through the whole store (Deighton, 2023). This argued feeling of safety and guidance was shared by nearly 40% of the participants. While this feels like a considerable amount, over 30% disagreed with this statement. The results of this particular assertion of our study propose that this idea of the "guiding hand" may perhaps be a more divisive element of brand experience than indicated by the study concerning IKEA (Deighton, 2023).

Moreover, the study has revealed that there is a tendency for customers to feel more connected to brands applying a maze than to brands with a different layout. This finding is important because it supports the idea that in-store experiences can enhance consumers' brand experience. Consumers' strong connection to a brand is particularly significant since in-store design was found to be linked to the brand and its image, as earlier discussed (Baumgarth et al., 2011). Consequently, this type of experiential shopping meets consumer wants and needs

by creating experiential value in relation to the brand itself (Mathwick et al., 2001).

Overall, the results on the questions aiming at the affective brand experience dimension were less unequivocal. Despite this, it can be concluded that there is a certain linkage between the maze and the affective brand experience. Since emotions are a primarily unconscious phenomenon (Sylwester, 2000), the exact impact may not be fully measurable, or at least not with our chosen method of examination. Therefore, we suggest further research on finding further insights on the impact on this dimension.

Behavioural Dimension

The survey has further emphasised the increase in time spent at a store as a consequence of the layout. Not only are customers “forced” to stay longer as they have to walk the complete path to reach the checkout, furthermore there is a linkage to the previously discussed interaction with products. Engaging with items and experiencing the whole range of products consequently keeps people in store for a longer period of time. The correlation supports Brakus et al. (2009) claim that a certain stimulus may evoke several dimensions simultaneously.

In addition to a prolonged in-store stay, the maze encourages augmented purchases. As the term “forced path layout” (Ebster & Garaus, 2011, p.12) indicates, customers are obliged to walk through the whole product range, while they can skip certain aisles in other layouts. Having to pass all shelves before finally reaching the checkout creates a conducive setting for augmented purchases. Three-fourths of the survey participants agreed that they bought more than initially intended as a consequence of the layout. This tendency may also be linked to the longer in-store stays and the enhanced customer-product interaction.

The results demonstrate that the maze-like structure influences the customer’s in-store behaviour, raising the time spent in the store, the interaction and consequently the amount of items bought. These behavioural patterns are intertwined and reinforce each other. This finding aligns with the Gruen Effect, since over 70% of the respondents indicated that they tend to buy more due to the labyrinth layout.

Thus, these findings indicate that the maze-like store structure as the brand-related stimulus triggers the behavioural dimension of brand experience. In contrast to the previously examined affective dimension, the impact on the behavioural aspect, ergo noticeable changes in actions, is easily retrieved. Thus, we suggest that the effect of the maze on this dimension is more conscious among customers, as there is a widespread agreement on the responses.

Intellectual Dimension

The intellectual brand experience is characterised by changes in cognition and thinking triggered by a certain stimulus. In the study, an attempt was made to find how the maze affects a customer’s curiosity, creativity and imagination.

Among half of the participants, it was agreed that the maze triggers their curiosity, creativity and imagination. This strongly supports the argument that labyrinths stimulate the creative part of the brain, as mentioned in the literature review (University of Winchester, 2019). As we progress through the labyrinth, the rational and logical part of the brain is engaged, creating an opening for our creative faculties to assume control, ultimately resulting in innovative viewpoints and solutions (ibid).

On the other hand, a considerable share of survey takers disagreed with the questions regarding this dimension. This may indicate that people’s creativity may not actively be

sparked in a noticeable way whilst in the labyrinth.

Theoretical Development and Analysis

Based on the previously discussed findings and the analysis, we developed a framework demonstrating the level of impact of the maze on the four different dimensions of brand experience, namely sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural, coined by Brakus et al. (2009). The maze-like floor plan, as a brand-related stimulus, may evoke several dimensions simultaneously. Furthermore, as pointed out by the arrows there are certain interlinkages between these facets. Thus, changes in a customer's feelings, emotions and behaviour, as well as the engagement of the senses may be induced at the same time. However, they may also be stimulated independently.

The framework was enriched by the quantitative finding of our survey, expressing what we refer to as 'the degree of activation'. A higher score thereby indicates a higher degree of activation of the respective dimension as a result of strong agreement among the respondents.

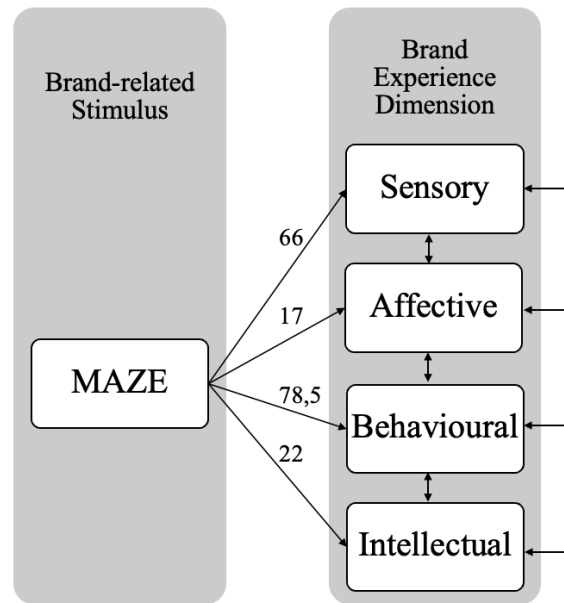


Figure 2: Theoretical Framework based on The Four Factor Model

Conclusion

Researchers have focused on identifying and explaining the correlation between store architecture and brand perception, as well as in-store layout and consumer behaviour. However, the phenomenon of a maze-like structure and its impact on the brand experience have not been directly addressed in the literature.

This study concludes that the maze-like structure affects the brand experience through the activation of the four different dimensions, however, to varying degrees. The second key discovery is that the maze is strongly dependent on the specific brand that utilises the maze. Finally, it was discovered that some dimensions are more easy to measure, such as the behavioural dimension, due to them being more tangible and conscious actions that consumers themselves are more aware of. Other dimensions appear to possess the quality of intangibility and unconsciousness, as they relate to emotions and feelings.

It should be mentioned that this is a study conducted on a very novel topic, therefore we were able to only scratch the surface and attempt to start forming a base for upcoming academic research, as there remains plenty of room for future research exploring the relationships of store layout (e.g. maze-like) and consumers' brand experience.

Implications

Managerial

It is recommended that companies work to build a brand that supports their particular brand experience since the maze is very dependent on the specific brand that utilises such a layout, as our findings suggest. There are consumers that oppose the labyrinthine layout, consequently, managers should work to identify the wants and needs of such consumers in regards to the brand experience and then create strategies that aim to navigate and cater those needs with the goal of improving the consumers' perceptions on the in-store layout. For example, at IKEA shortcuts were introduced to allow customers to bypass aisles. This adoption was positively acknowledged and shows a possibility of including those feeling restricted by the maze. Though, it has been revealed that the shortcuts still need to be significantly distinguishable from and not confused with the regular pathways (Deighton, 2023).

Furthermore, the maze-like layout is an experience as such, and it can be a source of competitive advantage. It is an effective way to boost profits as it encourages consumers to stay in the store longer and interact with the product range more, but also on a much deeper level the layout can be utilised to enhance the brand experience, for example, by encouraging engagement and even bolstering creativity and curiosity. Thus, it appears to be a source of great possibilities not only in defining consumers' brand

experience, but more importantly deepening and magnifying it in the minds of the consumers. As a result, managers should try to create strategies regarding their brand experience that aim to activate each of the dimensions.

Research

Several researchers have demonstrated strong links between store architecture and design and brand building (Burt & Davies, 2010; Bargenda, 2023; Kent & Stone, 2007) or consumer behaviour (Elbers, 2016). The literature review, however, has demonstrated a gap in the topic of the impact of store layouts on brand experience. This study has identified a direct link between these two phenomena. Furthermore, this study proves that it is possible to measure the impact of in-store architecture (in this case, store layout) on brand experience, but with certain limitations.

Our study indicates that the store layout can influence the brand experience by activating different dimensions proposed by Brakus et al. (2009). While this research shows that maze-like store layout has an effect on each of the four dimensions of brand experience (sensory, affective, behavioural, and intellectual), it is important to note that there are significant differences in the degree of activation.

Moreover, store layout should not be considered as a completely independent phenomenon. In the case of the maze-like store structure, which was the main part of our study, the perception is strongly dependent on the brand that utilises this type of layout.

Lastly, we have developed a framework based on the four dimensions of brand experience, which can help to explore the impact of in-store architecture on the brand experience. We believe that this model can be applied by other researchers and adapted

to other elements of in-store architecture, not just the layout.

Limitations & Future Research

Limitations

As this study is the first of its kind within this realm of research, it has certain limitations and consequently presents a suggestion for further study. The main limitations of this study can be associated with the chosen mode of data collection. Since an online questionnaire with closed-ended questions was chosen, the finding of the “how” and “why” of the answers was restricted. Moreover, the results of the participants' consciousness of IKEA's used maze-like layout may have been influenced by aided awareness, since “IKEA” and “maze” had already been mentioned in the same context. Thus the results may not be fully valid. Additionally, the Likert scale includes a “neutral” response, thereby participants were given the possibility to opt-out from answering if they wanted (Douven, 2017). Also, the terms “curiosity” and “creativity” were not defined for survey takers, leaving them up to interpretation for the respondents. (Partly) unconscious and intangible phenomena such as emotions and thinking could benefit from a different research format instead of a closed-end questionnaire.

Another limitation was in regards to the sample group, as it remained rather limited. The sample was not representative of every social group and it exhibited a notable degree of age group homogeneity, as a significant majority of respondents fell within the same narrow age range of 20 to 29 years, thereby resulting in a highly restricted age distribution. The pool of participants was also drawn from friends,

family and acquaintances from our social network.

In addition, due to retail brands evoking more experiences than other brands, scholars have suggested that the Brand Experience Scale should be adapted to fit a more retail-specific setting (Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Jones and Runyan, 2013).

Future research

To some extent, our study has filled a gap in the literature and opened up a room for further research.

Through the empirical data and analysis, our findings demonstrated that certain dimensions appear to have a quality of tangibility and consciousness, while others don't. Emotions and creativity can be intangible and unconscious behaviours, which is why we recommend that future studies explore these through qualitative research.

Furthermore, it should be noted that other in-store elements such as the type of products and the size of the store, can also influence brand experience. Hence, future research on the labyrinth layout should be conducted independently for each brand, since the brand experience of a store like IKEA can differ greatly from that of Flying Tiger.

Our final suggestion for future research is to study whether the impact of the maze-like structure on brand experience is positive or negative, and to explore this in-depth, as it was not the focus of our research.

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Appendices

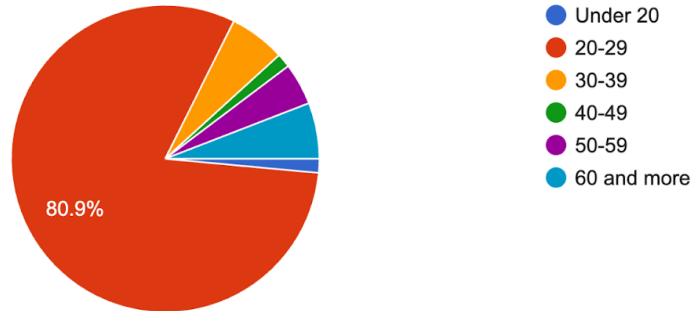
Appendix 1: Table of Scoring

Answers/ Dimension	Strongly Disagree (-2)	Disagree (-1)	Neutral (0)	Agree (1)	Strongly agree (2)	Su m	Average of each dimension
Sensory:							
Q1	1	5	11	29	22		
Sum	-2	-5	0	29	44	66	$66:1=66$
Affective							
Q2	1	21	19	16	11		
Sum	-2	-21	0	16	22	15	
Q3	4	14	18	23	9		$(15+19):2=17$
Sum	-8	-14	0	23	18	19	
Behavioural							
Q4	2	2	4	21	39		
Sum	-4	-2	0	21	78	93	
Q5	2	4	11	30	21		$(93+64):2=78,5$
Sum	-4	-4	0	30	42	64	
Intellectual							
Q6	4	14	16	26	8		
Sum	-8	-14	0	26	16	20	
Q7	3	15	18	19	13		$(20+24):2=22$
Sum	-6	-15	0	19	26	24	

Appendix 2: Survey Responses

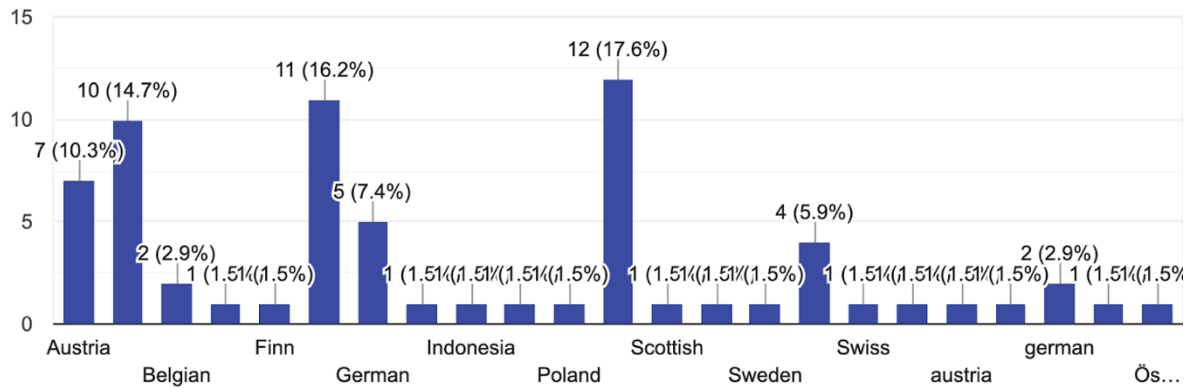
How old are you?

68 responses



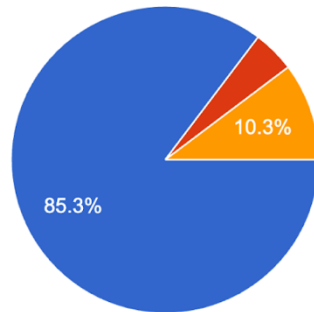
What is your nationality?

68 responses



Have you noticed that IKEA has a maze-like ("labyrinth") store layout?

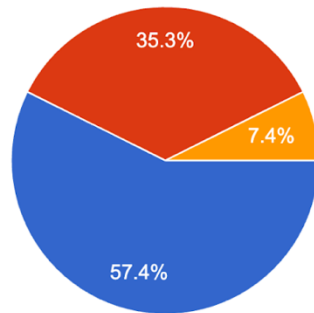
68 responses



- Yes, I was aware of it
- No, it is new to me
- I didn't consciously notice it but now that you're talking about it, I recognize it
- I have never been to this store

Stores like IKEA, Flying Tiger and Normal have a maze-like store layout which guides the customer throughout the entire store. Does it bother you hav... go through the whole store to reach the check-out?

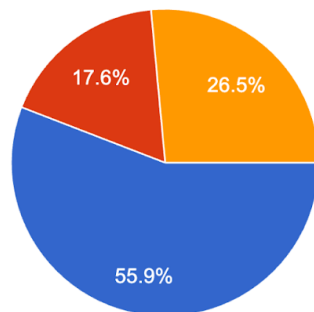
68 responses



- No, it doesn't bother me, I like the maze
- Yes, it bothers me
- I have no opinion

If IKEA took away the maze-like store layout I would:

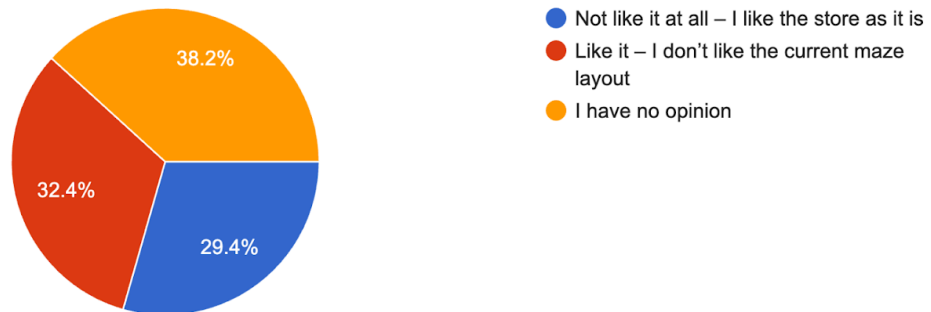
68 responses



- Not like it at all – I like the store as it is
- Like it – I don't like the current maze layout
- I have no opinion

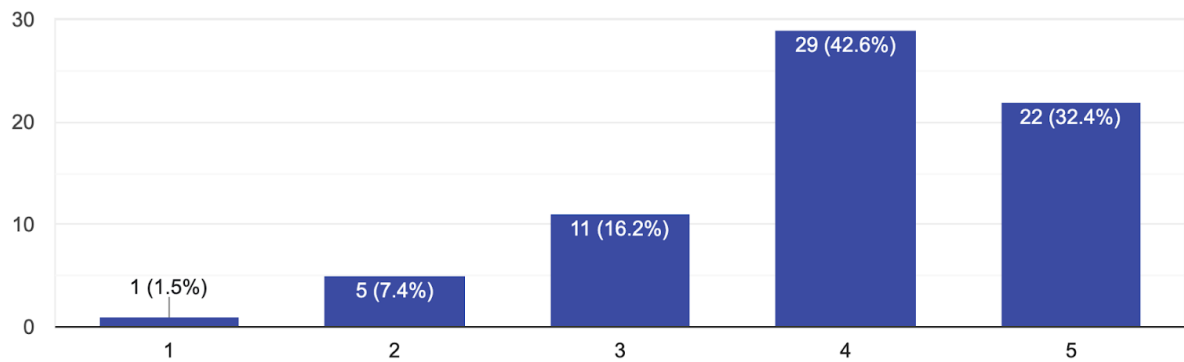
If Flying Tiger took away the maze-like store layout I would:

68 responses



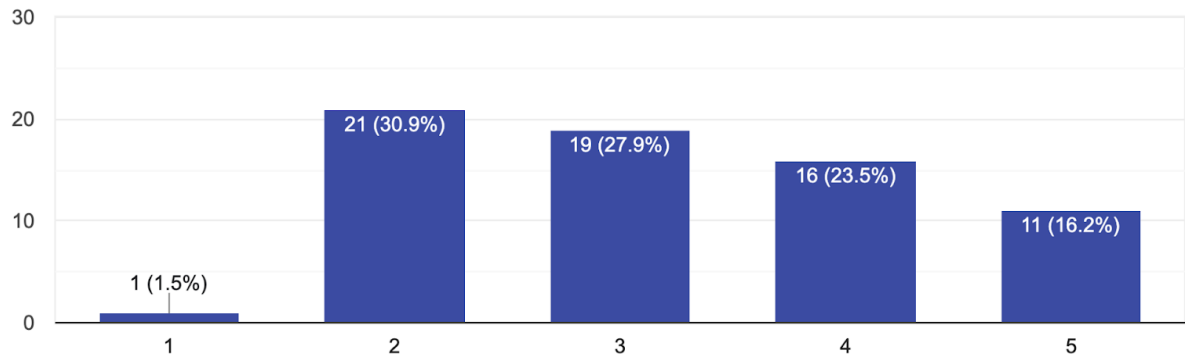
When I am in a store with a maze-like layout (e.g. IKEA and Flying Tiger), I interact (e.g. touch & smell) with the products more than in stores with a different layout.

68 responses



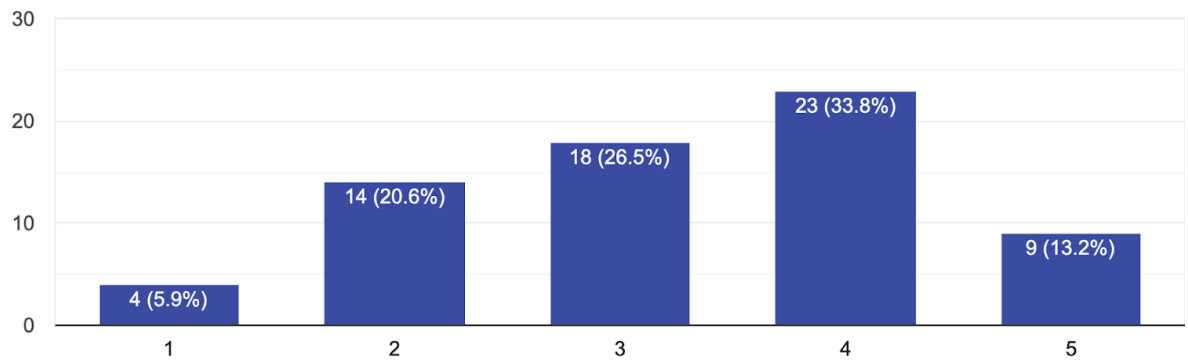
When I'm in the store, the maze-like layout makes me feel "safely guided" through the store, which I like.

68 responses



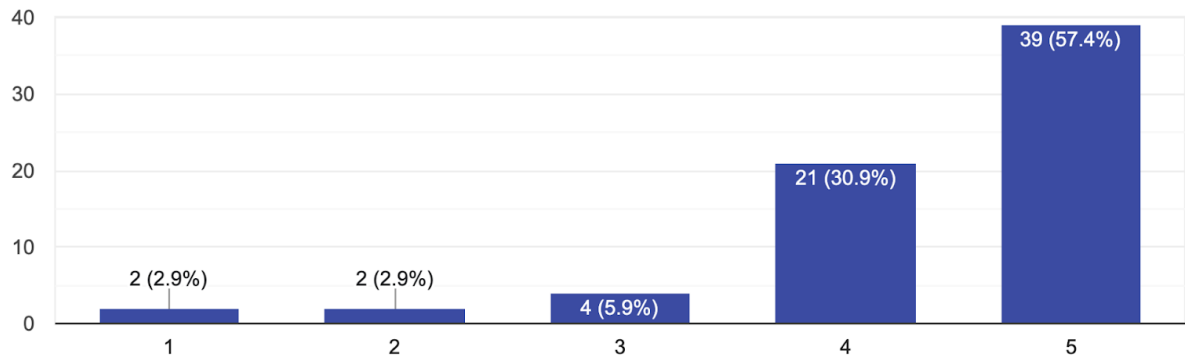
The maze-like structure makes me feel more connected to the brand than in other brands' stores without such a layout.

68 responses



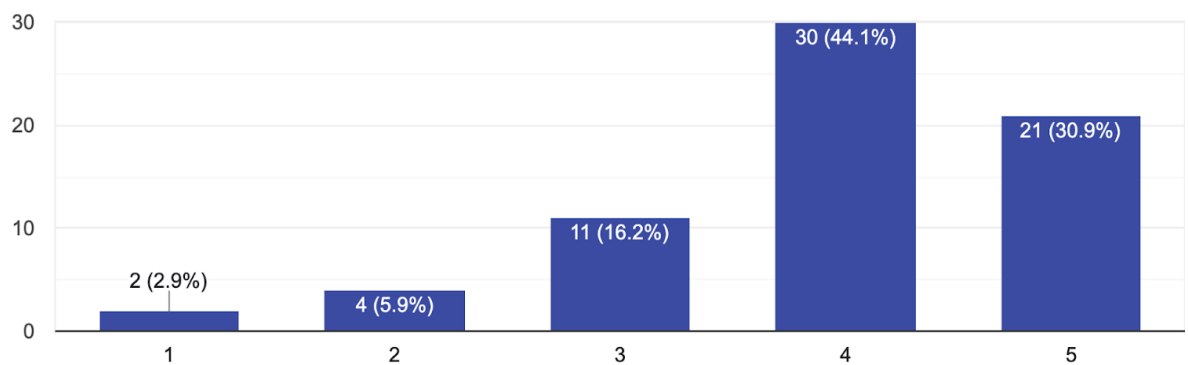
The maze-like layout makes me stay in the store longer than in stores without such a layout (e.g. with parallel aisles)

68 responses



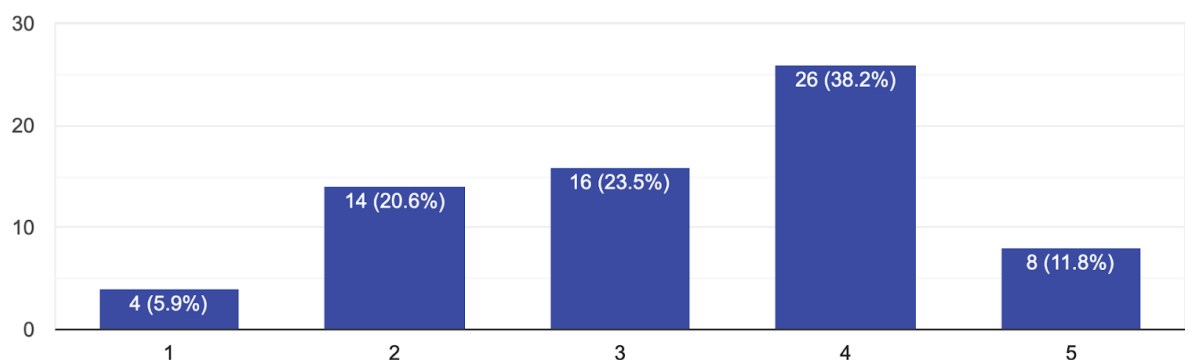
Walking through the maze-like store layout to get all the way to the check-out, I tend to buy more.

68 responses



I am more curious about the product range in stores with a maze-like layout compared to stores without such a layout.

68 responses



The stores with a maze-like structure spark my creativity and imagination more than other stores.

68 responses

