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A STUDY ON CUSTOMER PERCEPTION OF PANDEMIC ENFORCED DIGITAL SHIFT BY BRICK-AND-MORTAR RETAILERS

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ABSTRACT

The extended lockdowns created by the Corona pandemic meant that people would not have the freedom to do shopping and visit their favorite brick and mortar retailers. Rather than facing the uncertainty created by the Pandemic the regular brick and mortar retailers soon embraced the online route and the paper takes a look at how the consumers perceived the digital shift in satisfying their needs. The Corona pandemic and the ensuing lock down completely changed the scenario and the prevalent pattern of word of mouth, touch and feel was replaced by word of mouse, browse and select. The data was collected through personal interview method and a total of 100 respondents was selected for the study from Chennai district Tamil Nadu. Avoidance of crowding, mingling with unknown people, avoiding face to face interaction with salesmen, shopping from the safety of home, and having to spend time with fear of pandemic inside the shop were major perception factors that influenced the adoption of digital mode by consumers hitherto using the same physical shopping facilities. In future the study can be extended to semi urban and rural location. The manuscript would be highly useful for brick and mortar retailer planning their online foray as an added vertical and also for those who have already entered the arena to streamline their activities to be more palatable from the view point of customers.

KEYWORDS: Avoidance of crowding, Lockdown, Online shopping, Digital Shift, social distancing.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the year 2020 the novel Corona virus has spread fear and Panic in the minds of Indian consumers and has drastically impacted the way in which the consumers

would like to shop. The extended lockdowns meant that people would not have the freedom to do shopping and newer concepts like remote working ensured that the shopping needs tended to differ from what it was. People who visited the brick and mortar shops to fulfil their shopping needs suddenly found themselves in a situation where they were unable to leave the confines of their home because of the restrictions laid down by lockdown and having stayed inside for a considerable period would have brought about a change in the attitude defining their shopping behaviour. Gorbalenya,(2020) revealed that SARS-CoV-2 a novel disease can cause a severe acute respiratory syndrome that can easily spread among people because of its human-to-human transmissibility, The brick and mortar retailers soon understood the need to change and entered the digital market place in no time. Rather than facing the uncertainty created by the Pandemic the regular brick and mortar retailers soon embraced the online route and the paper takes a look at how the consumers perceived the digital shift in satisfying their needs. A comprehensive digital marketing strategy begins by creating a search-optimized website that should also include an active social media presence. The companies utilized social media traditional outreach as also paid media in their effort to convince the customer to move to online. The pandemic has bought out the resilience of the customer and the retailer to both get and sell respectively the needed product within the safety of the boundaries of their home.

Web marketing is the process of marketing the Products online to prospective consumers. Digital marketing enables the marketer to target the exact needs of the customer and fulfil it. Focusing on the specific target audience helps increases customer satisfaction and enables the customer to satisfy their needs. The role of digital marketing is to help to garner new traffic, leads, and sales for the business by reaching people looking for the products and services. Even though in times before Covid pandemic the brick-and-mortar retailers had an online presence, their usage was not common and people preferred buying from the same brick and mortar shops.

However, the Corona pandemic and the ensuing lock down completely changed the scenario and the prevalent pattern of word of mouth, touch and feel was replaced by word of mouse, browse and select. People have been virtually pushed to online mode as only virtual shopping is possible in the current scenario. Justus & Sunitha (2016) indicated that the word of mouse has the power to modify product choice especially when multiple facts showcase a similar factor. Surbhi (2020) revealed that Covid-19 introduced two major changes in customer behaviour viz, the hesitation to shop in a crowded store and an enlarged propensity towards digital. People simply dreaded the idea of having to go to a store because of fear of getting

infected with COVID especially in the initial days of lockdown. Aneesh (2020) found that 6 out of 10 consumers were reluctant to go to store due to fear of getting infected by Corona virus while more than 50% of consumers ordered products through online mode which they would have normally purchase at a store. Martin et al (2020) revealed that retailers who invest daringly and timely in running their businesses toward the behavioural changes can seize market shares and emerge as market leaders in the post-pandemic period.

The strict lockdowns resulted in people staying put at home and to satisfy their needs had to necessarily look for buy from home options. This resulted in a scamper among retailers to look for digital option to sustain themselves in the new normal. Besson and Rowe 2012 identified Digital technology as a major strength for leveraging organizational transformation because of its disruptive nature and cross-organizational and systemic effects. In addition to working on present challenges like making employees to compulsorily wear masks, maintaining social distance, Limiting the number of employees and customers in stores, faster service and reducing time spent by the customer in the store added to the fear in the minds of the customer that can cloud their decision making process most of the retailers have started a parallel online medium or have strengthen the online medium which was already in operation and customers were also more than willing to shift to online medium. Hence on the one hand customers have to fulfil their needs. On the part of retailers, they should ensure that customers need to have a fulfilling experience. The behaviour change can have a lasting impact on the way people are to shop in the years to come. Mcdonald (2020) revealed that 44% consumers feel their modification in shopping behaviour caused by pandemic will tend to remain the same going forward. Surbhi (2020) pointed out that adoption to digital mode will decide which retailer would be a leader, survivor, and laggard in the new world order. The change in consumer behaviour pattern necessitates a change in the way the retailer would have manged their operations and those who are nimble to quickly adopt to the change would have a better chance to succeed in the new normal. Huseynov and Yildirim (2014) emphasized the absence of physical interaction as a critical impairment in online retail sales followed by the factors such as individual information privacy and financial transaction security over the Internet. But post the pandemic, where the primary concern of most individuals is personnel safety and all factors such as store layout, parking convenience and visibility of product has been given the go by and consumers feel happy to stay put in the comforts of their home environment while making the purchase.

Review of literature

Martin et al (2020) said that 2003 SARS crisis revved up Alibaba's e-commerce successes in Asia while Chinese JD.com migrated the offline business to online channels in response to the challenge posed by SARS and is presently one of China's largest retailers. Accenture (2020) report stated that retailers need to improve their shopping efficiency, both in online and offline modes, and respond rapidly to shifting needs as the pandemic grows and the larger use of digital media requires retailers to considerably upsurge their investment in Omni channel capabilities. Suneera (2020) stated that top retailers in India have unanimously agreed on the necessity to accelerate digital reach as the pandemic has changed shopping behaviour of Indian consumers. Saahil (2020) revealed the omnipresence of Internet and technology in today's world has made popular brands to shift to social media platforms by integrating their websites with social media networks in order to connect with customers and grow their brands. Besson and Rowe (2012) identified digital technology as a major strength for leveraging organizational transformation in view of its disruptive nature and cross-organizational systemic effects. Archana & Ujwal, (2011) stated that the rate of diffusion and adoption of online buying amongst consumers is relatively low in India. Balasubramanian et al. (2003), stated that the time-tested service quality dimensions that propel customer satisfaction, such as the physical appearance of facilities, empathy, employee behaviour, and responsiveness are unobservable in online mode. Singh (2016) stated that online stores must display the merchandise available for sale with content, photographs, and sight and sound documents, whereas in a physical retail location, the actual merchandise will be available for direct assessment. Koufaris (2002) found that shopping enjoyment and perceived usefulness strongly envisaged an intention to re-purchase through online mode. Amrita (2020) found that the main spending classes that saw a major fall included online food ordering and dining out, while individuals preferred to purchase groceries and prepare their meals at home. Kanchan and Prithwiraj (2020) identified that thoughts such as whether the salesman washed his hands or why is the other person talking with masks pulled down can disturb one's consumption behaviour deeply, and can, affect brands and retailers contending for one's wallet. Kim (2020) revealed that farmers entered the internet and online orders have risen more than 10 times over the previous year for farms who use Barn2Door, an e-commerce site exclusive for farmers.

OBJECTIVE

To find out the customer perception of forced first time online experience in digital mode

offered by their regular brick and mortar retailers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The questions were based on the factors of perception of first-time online experience developed on the basis of focus group outcomes. This scale was developed on a five-point scale with 1 anchored as strongly disagree, 2 indicating disagree, 3 pointing to neither agree nor disagree, 4 stating agreement and 5 showing strongly agree intentions. The research instrument used was an interviewer administered survey. The resultant questionnaire comprised eighteen Likert scales focussing on the perception of the shift towards online retail. The study was targeted on customers who were used to shopping with brick and mortar suppliers but due to the pandemic and subsequent lockdown preferred to buy from the same retailer through online mode. This study was focussed on their first-time experience with the particular retailer's digital footprint. The data was collected through personal interview method and a total of 100 respondents identified through snow ball sampling method a non-probability sampling technique where prevailing study subjects recruit future subjects out of their acquaintances. The study was limited to Chennai district of Tamil Nadu.

Table 1: Statements of customer perception of forced digital shift caused by COVID- 19 Pandemic.

S No	Customer perception of forced digital shift caused by Pandemic	Mean Rank	Mean	SD	Friedman Chi square	Friedman multiple comparison
1.	I don't have to worry about crowding in the shop	10.8	2.79	1.377	107.772	1
2.	I don't need to mingle with people whom I do not know considering the pandemic situation	10.75	2.82	1.429		1
3.	I won't need to have face to face interaction with salesmen	10.68	2.82	1.41		2
4.	I am happy that I shop in the confines of my home	10.62	2.82	1.419		2
5.	I don't have to spend time in a shop with a fear of pandemic	10.61	2.82	1.4		2
6.	I end up saving a lot of time	10.29	2.67	1.272		3
7.	I don't have a time limitation to do my shopping	10.06	2.66	1.389		3
8.	I am spared of washing my cloths and an extra bath after I do a shopping	9.98	2.63	1.403		3
9.	I don't need to be afraid of standing in queue to pay and	9.97	2.63	1.368		3

	keep looking who is ahead and behind me					
10.	post shopping, I may not end up being Called for contact tracing information when someone form the shop is infected	8.74	2.24	1.335		3
11.	Unnecessary meeting of people whom I know well can be avoided in pandemic times	8.67	2.22	1.31		4
12.	I am happy that I don't need to wear the PPE's	8.65	2.22	1.423		4
13.	I am spared the hassle of commuting to the shop	8.63	2.27	1.45		4
14.	I have a satisfaction that I strictly obey lockdown rules	8.62	2.24	1.359		4
15.	I do not get influenced by sales person	8.53	2.21	1.358		4
16.	The fear of pandemic may cloud my ability to make a proper choice of merchandise	8.51	2.23	1.383		5
17.	I am able to see as much selection as possible	8.49	2.23	1.397		5
18.	I am spared the temptation to touch and see whatever is available on the shelf	8.43	2.19	1.343		5

Source: Primary data Computed

The Fredman's test value of 107.22 and P value 0.000 indicates that the influence of the seventeen perception factors is not similar. Non-Parametric Friedman's multiple comparisons test was carried out to identify the perception of Customer's forced digital shift caused by Pandemic

From the table the mean values of avoidance of crowding, mingling with unknown people, avoiding face to face interaction with salesmen, shopping from the safety of home, and having to spend time with fear of pandemic inside the shop were major perception factors that influenced the adoption of digital mode by consumers hitherto using the same physical shopping facilities.

As per Friedman multiple comparison test, avoidance of crowding, and evading the mingling with unknown people in a shop are the most predominant reasons for the adoption of contactless mode of shopping. The pandemic has brought in a sense of fear in the mind of customers who dread a crowded place and naturally tend to avoid known and unknown persons. Wilder and Freedman (2020) pointed out that one needs to depend on traditional public health procedures to curb the spread of this respiratory disease which at the moment includes isolation, social distancing and community containment. Consumers cannot exercise

community containment when they do physical shopping and hence their fear is justified.

The second category of reasons for the shift to online mode of shopping includes avoiding face to face contact with salesmen, shopping in the confines of my home, and avoiding the psychological fear of pandemic while shopping. Yezli (2020) stated that physical distancing intends to reduce contact between infected and the not infected people. Witte (2000) stated that in the case of COVID-19 fear is comprehensible and can help motivate behavioral change. By being in the comforts of the home people are combating their fear of pandemic. Kim (2020) revealed that presently many people consider themselves converts to online shopping and that it makes sense to turn online when weather is treacherous. Vala (2020) said that contactless delivery has at present a particularly large upsurge, with 37% of US consumers shifting to it.

The next category of customer perception of their change to online mode include saving time, not having to do shopping within the said pandemic enforced timing schedule, the need to wash clothes after a visit, being afraid of standing in a queue and being informed as a contact tracing when someone in the shop gets infected. Express News (2020) stated that, all customers who visited Lifestyle outlet between March 10 to March 17, 2020 and all employees who work inside Chennai's Phoenix mall were advised to stay careful and seek instant medical care after two employees of Lifestyle store tested positive for COVID-19. Wilder and Freedman (2020) identified social distancing as intended to decrease interactions between people in a broader community, where individuals may be infectious but may not yet been identified and hence not isolated. Alreck and Settle (2002) stated that hurried consumers identified online shopping as an active time-saving strategy.

The next influencing categories of customer perception factors include avoidance of unnecessary meeting of known people, happy that one does not need to wear masks and gloves, being spared the hassle of commuting to the shop, and not getting influenced by sales person. Girard (2003) stated that a second phase arose, when it was possible to go out but necessitated the use of masks which could limit the transmission of Covid-19 through the micro-droplets released during breathing or coughing. Kirby (2020) found that the use of medical devices such as masks, required correct usage, based on medical principles which unfortunately is unknown to the whole population. Chen et al., (1991) discussed cultural deficiency, linked to the breathing difficulties because of use of filter, that tend to make the masks ineffective or maybe dangerous as they have the potential to be a vehicle for the transmission of the disease itself

The final influencing categories of perception factors include the fear of pandemic clouding

the ability to make a proper choice of merchandise, being spared the temptation to touch and see whatever is available on the shelf. Witte (2000) stated that in the case of COVID-19 fear is comprehensible and can help motivate behavioral change. Larissa (2020) Observed that a pandemic shift is pragmatism wherein time is spent more on completing a task to tick off a list rather than the than actual shopping. Justus et al (2007) stated that preservation of health and prevention of pandemic diseases are vital for the well-being of any community. Here online platform is a silent warrior to ensure social distancing and avoidance of crowding a much-needed measure to combat the spread of COVID -19

CONCLUSION

This paper has brought the perception of customers on their change to virtual shopping mode leaving their comfort zone of shopping from physical facilities. The digital mode has offered many a win-win solution to all the treats posed by the pandemic situation. The online media tends to safe guard with its present day contactless (no signature) delivery has ensured to clear the customer from most of the dangers associated with shopping like getting into contact with infected people or touching objects handled by infected people. The online shopping provides customers with quality family time where they can join as a family while making purchase decision. In future the study can be extended to semi urban and rural location. The above paper would be highly useful for brick and mortar retailer planning their online foray as an added vertical and also for those who have already entered the arena to streamline their activities to be more palatable form the view point of customers. It is time for retailers to work on their online platform to make themselves more relevant in the pandemic scenario. It is to be seen how this behavioural change operates and whether the change would be permanent or may shift to a new normal in future.

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