

COVID-19 and buying behavior: Word-of-Mouth as a significant force

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Abstract: Word of Mouth (WOM) communication has been identified and is widely recognized as an important method of marketing and promotion, in addition to being an important source of information that greatly affects the purchase decisions of a customer (Wijewardene, 2017). The success of any venture largely depends on the ability to communicate with its audience effectively (Shaikh, 2014), and WOM plays a significant role in providing consumers the opportunity to assess the worth of a product and/or a service with first-hand information prior to purchase or experience (Wijewardene, 2017). It is a known fact that critical situations push human behavior towards different directions with some aspects of behavior being irrevocable (Mehta et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and its disruptive nature brought about chaos and disruption (Wijewardene, 2021) triggering panic buying in many countries, leading to the shortage of goods, supply chain interruptions, and many problems in the day-to-day lifestyle of people (Nawarathne and Galdolge, 2022). Since all elements of the economy are intricately interrelated with public health measures and lockdown, this resulted in economic instabilities of nations hinting towards change in market dynamics (Mehta et al., 2020). This article looks at WOM on the behaviour of consumers during the COVID-19 crisis and in the subsequent lockdown period, whilst attempting to understand consumer behavior in normal times and in crisis times.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Word-of-Mouth, consumer behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel Coronavirus, now known as COVID-19, was discovered in late 2019 in Wuhan, China (Tu, Tu, Gao, Shao and Sheng, 2020) and there was an exponential increase in the number of cases across countries (ReliefWeb, 2020). The Coronavirus pandemic can be considered as one of the most critical recurrent problems that is challenging the world today (Agba *et al.*, 2020), having triggered major changes at all levels of society. According to the World Health Organisation (2021) the Coronavirus had infected over 220 million people and killed over 4.57 million people by the end of September 2021. The world is witnessing wave after wave of the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in the paralysis of all sectors (Rifiyanti, 2020).

Many countries, continents and regions, both urban and rural have severely been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and have seen changes in the thought process and lifestyle of people (Jawaid and Karim, 2021). The pandemic has forced governments around the world to impose strict measures such as isolations, lockdowns and quarantine processes which have placed restrictions on populations, economies and trade activities in addition to crippling the day-to-day activities of the global population. This has led to the facilitation of the e-commerce business around the world, whereby, e-commerce has transformed the strategies for marketing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jawaid and Karim, 2021).

Word-of-Mouth

The COVID-19 pandemic has broadly increased online shopping traffic in the modern business environment due to lockdown policies and restriction over social gatherings which forced brands to shut down their physical stores and opt to go for the online stores. (Sharma & Jhamb, 2020).

The term WOM refers to the spreading of information via oral communication Groeger and Buttle (2014). Word of mouth in the context of marketing refers to customers of a brand/s sharing their experiences and satisfaction with other people via oral communication (Zhang et al., 2019). The concept of word of mouth is used for marketing purposes and is

identified as effective, although it does not necessarily demand extra efforts from an organization. Chen and Yuan (2020) highlighted that the purchasing behaviors of many customers are influenced by the recommendations and opinions of their close friends and family members as they trust these people and believe that their recommendations would be beneficial for them. However, in today's globalized world, the influence of recommendation of WOM is not restricted to close friends and family members as now, a single recommendation from anywhere around the world has substantially great impact on the purchasing behaviors and attitudes of customers around the world, and, many marketers have focused on WOM for their marketing activities and strategies (Zhang et al., 2019). In the contemporary business environment, especially post COVID-19, with the help of social media technologies, marketers are focused on developing their WOM marketing as they believe that it has a significant impact on shaping customer behavior and attitudes, and that COVID-19 has contributed widely to a drastic change in consumer behavior (Naeem, 2021). There was an increase in the online shopping consumer base during the government lockdowns. On the whole, online shopping has increased after the emergence of COVID-19 (Statista, 2021) as people were more focused on shopping easily without engaging in any sort of risk of being exposed to the COVID-19 virus, and after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic there was a decrease of around 50 per cent in physical shopping (Bhatti et al., 2020).

Understanding consumer behavior

Purchasing behavior of consumers is purpose-oriented (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000) and not always conscious (Al-Hashimi & AIDhari, 2019). Hence, it is vital to recognize the different types of consumers with different buying decision behaviors based on the level of involvement (Galdolage, 2013) and the ability to perceive significant differences among the brands (Molthersbaugh, Hawkins, & Utomo, 2016). However, consumers do not limit their behavior to a single pattern and, this pattern can vary depending on the situation and purchasing elements. However, in times of pandemics, consumers take utmost care in refraining from purchasing products that they consider as unnecessary (Foxall, Oliveira-Castro, James, Yani-de Soriano, & Sigurdsson, 2006). Consumer behavior during pandemics is unusual (Keane & Neal, 2021) and needs to be studied further (Islam et al., 2021).

Al-Hashimi & AIDhari (2019) explain consumer behaviour as being the selection, purchase, and consumption of goods and services that satisfy human needs and wants. Consumer behavior is largely influenced by cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors (Cohen & Areni, 1991), in addition to consumer beliefs and perception towards the brand or the products (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 2009), which in turn, lead to specific customer actions (Ishak, Khalid, & Sulaiman, 2018). Consumer behavior stems from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Fullerton, 2013). Pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase are three stages of the decision-making process that a consumer experiences (Solomon, 2018), with the purchasing decisions of an individual varying in different contexts (Chandan, 2019).

Marketers are required to have some knowledge of consumer purchasing behavior (Solomon, Russell-Bennett, & Previte, 2012) so as to understand the expectations of customers (Zhao, Xue, Khan, & Khatib, 2021), and what motivates them to make certain purchase decisions (Jo, Shin, & Kim, 2021). Understanding the factors that influence consumers' purchasing decisions (Santos, Ramos, Sousa, Almeida, & Valeri, 2021) enables marketers to fill market gaps (Niessen & Hamm, 2008). This understanding helps marketers to decide on who to target, how to target, when to reach them, and what message to deliver to persuade the target audience to purchase the product (Dibb & Simkin, 1991).

Pandemics

The dictionary definition of a pandemic is, an epidemic which crosses international boundaries, thereby affecting a large number of people, globally or over a large area (Last, 1990). A pandemic could be further explained as a widespread epidemic of infectious illness that affects an entire country or one or more continents simultaneously (Honigsbaum, 2009). A delve into history will provide evidence of pandemics that affected the global population. Some of these are, the Spanish flu during 1918–1920, which can be considered as a major global pandemic (Aassve, Alfani, Gandolfi & Le Moglie, 2021) which spread to many countries due to the absence of a vaccine (Hobbins, 2020). Another destructive pandemic, HIV Aids, was identified in the early 1980s (Merson, 2006), and affected around 40 million people, globally (Hemelaar, 2013). The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, which surfaced in China (Xu *et al.*, 2004) during the early years of this millennium, spread globally (Huang, 2004), but was controlled from causing wide-spread destruction (Lu, Stratton & Tang, 2020). Huremovic (2019) perceived it as being dangerous. In February 2004, a virus

known as the Avian Influenza Virus (Avian flu, Ebola, and Zika) affected poultry in Vietnam, thereby infecting poultry workers (Rabaa *et al.*, 2015) with cases being reported from many other countries (Spencer, Finucane, Fox, Saksena & Sultana, 2020). The most recent pandemic, commonly referred to as COVID-19/Corona Virus which has caused unprecedented chaos and destruction, globally, originated in late 2019 in Wuhan, China (Li, Feng & Quan, 2020) and has affected over 210 countries (World Health Organization, 2021). This COVID-19 pandemic has affected the normal living behavior of communities (Marais & Sorrell, 2020), including changes in their social relationships (Okabe-Miyamoto, Folk, Lyubomirsky & Dunn, 2021), spending patterns (Martin, Markhvida, Hallegatte & Walsh, 2020) and consumer behavioral changes (Hall, Fieger, Prayag & Dyason, 2021; Eger, Komárková, Egerová, & Mičík, 2021).

Change in consumer behavior due to COVID-19 pandemic

Consumers are the drivers of market competitiveness, growth and economic integration; however, due to economic instability as a result of the pandemic, consumers are experiencing a transformation in behaviour (Mehta *et al.*, 2020).

A consumer is a person who identifies a need or desire, makes a purchase and then disposes of the product in the consumption process (Mehta *et al.*, 2020). A typical consumer's utility is dependent on the consumption of agricultural and industrial goods, services, housing and wealth (Grundey, 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented situation for the whole world as the number of infected cases due to this disease has reached very high proportions across the globe creating a huge economic challenge because most business organizations either do not function or have run out of funds due to several restrictions. (Satish *et al.*, 2021). The flow of income has reduced, affecting the spending pattern of the consumers (Kumar and Abdin, 2021). In this pandemic, it is difficult to accept reality, self-isolate and restrict oneself from consumption and frequent purchase (Banerjee, 2020). Additionally, the severity of COVID-19 has given rise to the stockpiling behaviour among consumers, who restrict the number of visits to the store and purchase products in large quantities (Redman, 2020), whilst creating a mammoth psychosocial impact among individuals due to the anxiety and stress of living through the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to global health and economic crises (Bostan, Erdem, Öztürk Kılıç, and Yılmaz, 2020), whilst causing uncommon consumer behaviors (Laato, Islam, Farooq, and Dhir, 2020), such as panic buying around the world (Bacon and Corr, 2020). The consumer's beliefs vary with the influence of norms and standards followed by peers and social groups, that is, whether important people such as family and friends approve or disapprove of the intention to perform the behavior (Alexa *et al.*, 2021). There have been instances where consumers have purchased goods that are of no use to them in the present, such as fresh meat when it is available and store it in the refrigerators for a week fearing its unavailability in the next week. This stockpiling behavior which is also known as "Greedy Behaviour," is considered to be an unhealthy practice (Santos, Ramos, Sousa, Almeida and Valeri, 2021). Santos *et al.*, (2021) further discuss that consumers who stockpile may not entirely use the goods they have bought as some of the goods may lose their original quality when stored for a long, time, resulting in consumers disposing of the spoiled goods and/or the old stock.

Panic buying during the pandemic

Panic buying, can be described as consumer behavior where people buy large quantities of products to avoid future shortages (Shou, Xiong & Shen, 2013).

According to Yuen, Wang, Ma & Li (2020), panic buying in times of crisis such as the pandemic, is seen as a common trend, which was the case in many countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, where panic purchases were made, especially of storable consumer goods such as toilet paper, rice, pasta etc. in many countries (Loxton, *et al.*, 2020). Panic buying occurs when consumers purchase unusually large quantities of products (Naeem, 2021) in anticipation of a disaster or perceived disaster or in anticipation of a significant price increase or scarcity (Kaur & Malik, 2020). Panic purchasing can also be identified as a form of herd behavior (Arafat, Hussain, Kar, Menon & Yuen, 2020), resulting in the scarcity of goods (Li, Zhou, Wong, Wang & Yuen, 2021), whether the threat of a shortage is actual or perceived (Yasir Arafat *et al.*, 2020). It is therefore required to carefully acquire and handle information in order to reduce the consequences (Hall *et al.*, 2021), as lowering the amount at stake or deferring will also reduce uncertainty (Wijaya, 2020). Fear and panic can be viewed as critical human reactions to impending public health challenges (Sim, Chua, Vieta & Fernandez, 2020) such as epidemics and pandemics (Bonneux & Van Damme, 2006).

Panic buying was seen in many countries, due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, leading to inventory shortages, supply chain disruptions, and many problems in the day-to-day lifestyle of people (Nawarathne and Galdolage, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people exhibited unusual purchasing habits at certain retailers (Weerasinghe and Selvarajan, 2022). People believed that consumer goods such as rice, milk, oil, biscuits, dairy products etc. would be unavailable in the market (Keanne & Neal, 2021) causing them to indulge in panic-buying as they rushed to purchase these products in bulk, causing the market to face a consumer goods deficit, particularly in products such as essential goods, Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG), fuel, and wine (Thakur & Kiran, 2021). This unusual behavior led to supermarkets having to deal with large crowds, empty shelves, and long lines at cashier counters (David, Visvalingam & Norberg, 2021). Further, it caused issues with demand management, inventory management, and customer retention (Dulam, Furuta & Kanno, 2021). This unusual purchasing behavior also resulted in the development of black marketing and other forms of deliberate inflation (Rubinstein, 2020).

Panic buying, happens suddenly and tends to go out of control (Billore & Anisimova, 2021). Uncertainty is known to cause anxiety (Taylor, 1974), so the individual needs to reduce anxiety through risk reduction (Leung *et al.*, 2021). Panic buying has also been linked with insecurity and instability due to certain situations (Hendrix & Brinkman, 2013), and supply disruption, which is a condition where interrupted regular product supply in the supply chain has been frequently observed during a disaster or calamity (Shou *et al.*, 2013). In such situations, many people unexpectedly buy as much food, fuel, and medical equipment as possible, due to fear of shortages (Billore & Anisimova, 2021).

E-commerce

As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged around the world, there was a change in buyer behavior encouraging businesses to switch to the digital marketplace (Jawaid and Karim, 2021). These sudden challenges have forced organizations to create new digital solutions and adapt themselves to the new normal whilst encouraging consumers to use online shopping (Villa & Monzón, 2021). E-commerce refers to the purchase and sale of raw material, services or any form of product and service by which the digital medium is used by the customers and businesses. Moreover, ecommerce retail is distinguished as the exchange of products and services among the business and consumers (Jawaid and Karim, 2021). After the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and social distancing were supposed to persuade the consumers toward online buying (Tran, 2021). The e-commerce industry has globally been categorized based on various departments clothing, electronics, beauty and personal care and other products and WOM has been seen as a significant force in persuading consumer purchases (Afridi *et al.*, 2021).

WOM and buying behaviour

The emergence of the Internet plays a critical role in today's economy and social life, which has become almost essential for daily communication (Shivaprasad & Rani 2020). The importance of word-of-mouth (WOM) impact on the behaviour of consumers has been emphasized by research (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955; Arndt 1967). New media expansion has increased its relevance in the market and new technologies facilitate the sharing of product and brand information amongst customers (Ardyan *et al.* 2021). This new technique of exchanging product information is regarded as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and has been defined as 'any positive or negative announcement made by potential, current or former customers concerning a product or company made available through the Internet to many persons and institutions' (Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004, p. 39). In recent researches, it has been highlighted that eWOM has been influencing consumer behaviour, like traditional WOM (Park and Kim 2008; Rani & Shivaprasad 2019), and has a direct relation to sales (Verma and Yadav 2021; Wang 2011).

Studies have highlighted that 88 per cent of people tend to shape their purchasing decision based on the reviews on social media and search engines, whilst indicating that there is no substantial difference in their trust levels as they are keen to accept these reviews as much as they trust WOM recommendations of trusted individuals (Hernández-Méndez *et al.*, 2015) Hence it can be said that many people choose their ecommerce platforms for shopping based on the reviews of their loved ones or reviews of social media (Zhao *et al.*, 2020). Big e-commerce giants such as Amazon, E-bay, and AliExpress are highly dependent on what their customers have to say about their services to ensure the enlargement of their customer base and increment in sales and profits (Hidayanto *et al.*, 2017). It could be said that WOM has played a big role in the popularity of these e-commerce giants, because, when customers are satisfied by the services provided, they tend to act as brand ambassadors for the brand and attract more customers, with WOM playing a pivotal role in consumer behavior

(Zhao et al., 2020). In these post-pandemic times, people are looking for brands that come recommended, and, word-of-mouth marketing, coupled with the lingering effects of the pandemic, have since provided crucial insight into changing consumer behavior (Zhao et al., 2020).

There are two types of WOM - organic and amplified. The term organic WOM refers to consumers naturally showcasing their happiness and satisfaction with the brand by posting reviews online or suggesting brand to other people while the amplified WOM refers to marketers launching marketing campaigns that are shaped to take input and reviews from customers which are then used for marketing purposes to attract more people (Hidayanto et al., 2017).

Consumer satisfaction and WOM/E-WOM

Consumers purchase a product/service that raises their degree of expectation and gets them delighted (Crotts and Magnini, 2011). Delighted buyers are involved in sharing their experiences with their friends and family and spreading positive WOM to others (Parasuraman et al., 2020). Happy buyers generally share their opinions while posting positive feedback through social media platforms globally (Zhang, 2017). A positive WOM of the buyer acts as a fundamental factor in spreading awareness about the product/service and strongly impacts other buyers regarding buying it (Rahmadini and Halim, 2018). Delighted consumers tend toward brand loyalty; thus, they increase their buying intention of the service or product (Ludwig et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2021). Customers can understand the objective of loyalty in purchasing a similar product or a new one from the same company. Delighted consumers tend to indulge in a higher degree of an emotional state that leads them to higher purchase intentions; it eliminates the switching of brands (Parasuraman et al., 2020). Kim et al. (2015) stated that consumers delighted with a product or service of a brand become loyal to it, and the possibility of switching brands gets very low. Satisfied consumers are more eager to purchase the same product again (Tandon et al., 2020) Oliver et al. (1997) recommended that a degree of delight in a buyer is termed as a positive emotion. Consumers purchase a product/service that raises their degree of expectation and gets them delighted (Crotts and Magnini, 2011). Delighted buyers are involved in sharing their experiences with their friends and family and spreading positive WOM to others (Parasuraman et al., 2020). Happy buyers generally share their opinions while posting positive feedback through social media platforms globally (Zhang, 2017). A positive WOM of the buyer acts as a fundamental factor in spreading awareness about the product/service and strongly impacts other buyers regarding buying it (Rahmadini and Halim, 2018).

Word-of-mouth marketing in a post-pandemic world

Since the pandemic, consumer behavior has experienced a whirlwind of change making word-of-mouth marketing all the more important (Jawaid and Karim, 2021). Even with social distancing restrictions keeping people away from each other, the importance of word-of-mouth marketing has actually increased during the pandemic, with people turning to online shopping, and WOM recommendations by trusted friends and family members to determine which businesses to support during such an unprecedented time (Jawaid and Karim, 2021). In the COVID-19 pandemic era, supermarkets still have a great opportunity to be developed due to a lot of customers who still prefer to shop directly at stores. This is also an opportunity for supermarkets to create customer loyalty. Positive word-of-mouth is a current marketing communication strategy that can create customer loyalty.

WOM has been identified as having a robust effect on the purchasing behavior of the customers, both physically and online, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, word-of-mouth has become one of the most significant marketing strategies that are also used for the marketing of the product or services of the organization, as it does not require any additional cost or effort of the organization for marketing their products or services. (Juliana *et al.*, 2020)

2. CONCLUSION

Therefore it could be concluded that WOM has a significant effect on purchase decisions of buyers in times of crisis. Observational learning has a significant effect on online purchase decisions, and there is an influence of word-of-mouth and observational learning on online purchase decisions simultaneously. Word-of-mouth is a factor that influences online purchase decisions with positive word of mouth, which will increase consumer online purchase decisions. Observational learning is an important factor in making a purchase decision with good observational learning that will increase consumer online purchase decisions. Recommendations for future researchers would be to add other variables that affect online purchase decisions and consumer behavior in a post-pandemic era.

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