MAPPING CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF ONLINE MARKETING: A LESSON FROM COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Marketing strategies have been witnessing an inclination towards the shift from physical to digital medium. The COVID-19 pandemic had just accentuated this transformation to a greater extent. Currently, the small- and medium-scale industries are struggling to retain their customers and trying to identify the important marketing dimension for the customers shifting from offline to online shopping. The study had two objectives: (a) to examine differences in the general perception towards online shopping with respect to the gender and education of online shoppers; (b) to identify the most effective parameters of general perception towards online shopping.Data were collected from185 adults by administering a general information schedule and two different sets of questions concerning the consumer's perception of online marketing during the pandemic. Chi-square analysisrevealed that there is unanimous agreement among consumers from different age and education background with respect to their perception of online marketing. Further, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) extracted two components mapping consumer perception of online marketing, namely, General Online Preference and Festive Online Preference. It will help small and medium firms to design a sustainable online marketing strategy best fitted for the consumers with diversified socio-cultural background and preferences.

Key words : Online Marketing, Covid-19 Pandemic, Mapping Consumer Perception, Buying Preference

INTRODUCTION

Good marketing is a process which satisfies consumers by providing superior value than others. Most of the firms offer value proposition in such a way that help them to develop their core competencies. Significant changes in the market can be found with changing socio-cultural and economic demography of the buyers. Marketing in various disciplines are transforming in different ways. Organised market processesare gainingpreferencesof the consumers' by providing a one-stop-solution. For the past decade, online marketinghas become a substitute for the buyers who do not get enough time for their marketing activities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has impaired the blueprint for developing online marketing strategies. It rather, challengedthe functioning of all our resources, starting from education, health, entertainment, tourism, retail business and others operating in various fields. As a matter of fact, most of the industries presently, are trying to perform all operations online to manage their customers' requirement, predominantly because most of the industries got badly affected due to theglobal pandemic.

Undoubtedly, during this pandemic situation, businesses are heavily depending on digital platforms in terms of process and operations (Darley et al., 2010).The contagion has also had a deep impact on consumers–customers journey towards online buying. Digital buying has been increasing owing to the use ofvirtual platforms on a daily basis.Marketers have been using these platforms heavily to communicate and reach out to the target customers, as well as to identify and fulfil the requirement of prospective customers (Powers et

al., 2012). Moreover, advanced technology facilitates the shoppers to process buying information and marketers can actually generate, reproduce and fulfil the shopper's need through commercialization (Rayna, 2008). In a country like India, online shopping is not an old concept. Instead, it is quite new and most of the industries are trying to adopt the new mode of business process. It is expected by the experts that in the post COVID phase, digitalization in business system will act as a major determinant of business success.

Digital marketing has been defined in several ways. For instance, American Marketing Association (AMA) defined marketing as "the organizational function, which generates a series of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers, and managing customer relationship as well as has the stakeholders of an organization acquire profits" (Solomon et al., 2006; Shyu, Chiang, Chien& Wang, 2015, p. 173). It connects the consumers to the buyersthrough internet connectivity (Kotler& Armstrong, 2009).

Digital marketing simplyprojects conventional marketing strategies into internet (Piñeiro-Otero &Martínez-Rolán, 2016).It is not only a survival strategy for private organizations but also for the government institutions that are following, emphasising and promoting the use of digital/ online platform for various activities starting from communication and transaction to delivery and purchase. Undoubtedly,the pandemic acted as a catalyst for business houses and consumers for introducing a new journey in their ways of life. When we talk about customers' liking towards any buying, it is more or less a combination of hedonic and eudemonic experiential consumption (Collier et al., 2018; Price et al., 1995). In true sense, offline buying offers the customers to fulfil the hedonic perception of touching the commodity before buying and feel the satisfaction in buying it. Nevertheless, the pandemic has constricted it to a great extent. It is noted by the researchers that in this situation, strong service, support and distribution experience can motivate customers to fulfil their striking needs for buying (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015; Anderson et al., 2013).

Marketing is nothing but the development of customer value and satisfaction. In any marketing practices,customers are pleased and satisfied with the services of the organization if customers'expectation from the same exceeds to a considerable degree(Oliver et al.,1997). Offline marketing offers greater satisfaction to customers as it offers them to feel the commodity through physical touch. Online marketing, on the other hand, lacks this physical touch and therefore offers less delight and satisfaction. For instance, Alinaet al., (2020) found that people prefer to buy food related products from stores. However, most of the small-scale producers are unable to adopt the digital transformation which in turn, is affecting the entire economy related to the demand and supply performance. Researchers found that customers' reaction to commodities is influenced by several psychological factors, for instance, self-realization, trust, belonging, comprehending an idea and regulating bias (Donald et al., 2020; Cleveland et al., 2011). Trustworthiness of marketing practices helps develop self-enhancing needs of the consumers and convert their perceived self-worth (Fiske, 2008).Digital marketers try to enhance these two components while consumers optimistically place good faith on digital marketing as a result of their enhanced trust level (Sears, 1983).Marketers are interested to use digital marketing to reduce business failure, to grow their business andreturn more in terms of profit (Janusi, 2020). Online marketing offers economic pricing, high reach targeting, quality product and comfortable services and therefore allow the customers to shop easily in a convenient manner (Durmaz&Efendioglu, 2016).

There has beena lot of research done in various sectors to find out the preferences and tendencies of consumers towards buying methods in the post-pandemic period. Most of them mentioned that digital platforms are going to create a niche in the market (Seith 2020). Generally, small firms spend most of their time in production and bringing the commodity into the market. However, due to the lack of digital literacy and awareness about online system, they are not able to reach to the customers in proper time and consequently their business is affected. In this regard, digital transformation provides the support that helps them in developing their infrastructure and distribution. Digital process can empower small firms in designing and development of marketing activities (Szalavetz,, 2020).Previous research suggests the implementation of digital technology in SME (Winarsih, 2020). Marketers need to develop functionality of digital uses in terms of sales, marketing, manufacturing and communication along with the need to concentrate on the security, simulation, internet, cyber security and blockchain for smooth functions of system.

COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a lot of change in the mind set of consumers and has forced them to convert their process of buying from offline to online (Hoekstra 2020). It can be noted that during the pandemic, large-scale industries immediately switched to online platformsforevery single activity, starting from taking orders to delivery and communication. Even customers habituated to offline shopping also switched to online platforms. It is noted that marketers doing business through online platforms get an

extra edge in terms of return. This, rather, allows them to plan their online strategy that can enhance the awareness and trust level of customers from different backgrounds (Melis et al., 2016). During pandemic, local buying power increases. But owing to minimal exposure to online business, marketers need to follow multichannel strategy in order to stay with their customers (Pauwels&Neslin, 2015).

Needless to say, development of online marketing is a progressive one, with developments in structural processes taking place that can facilitate identifying prospects and designing more prominent strategies based on their experiences (Ahmadi, 2020). For instance, marketers are trying to understand buying behavior, preferences, buying opportunities and threat using artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies. Such use of technology not only facilitates large firms in their business endeavour, but also enhances proficiency of the medium and small-scale firms in their operations. More importantly, such tools assist marketers to plan market segmentation and target positioning (Ivanov, 2020) as also to automatically analyze customer preferences, selection of choices and communication, proving more effective and accurate way than the conventional methods (Wu et al., 2019). In the virtual platform, customers can compare products and quality round the clock (Ballester et al., 2019) and it allows marketers to access customer's liking and offer their services in a short span of time. This rather fosters loyalty among the customers (Souri et al.,2019).

The above discussion gives us a clear indication of market transformation from physical to digital. Our government is also promoting digital India concept and pandemic is being instrumental in achieving this objective. It can be noted that every sector is changing their approach to digital space and trying to adopt this concept taking help of modern techniques and promoting their business in this way. But business gets success, if only it is accepted by the customers. In India, we find different classes of people with their different choices, preferences and buying habit. For instance, there is a clear difference between urban and rural population with respect to their choices and preferences. It is therefore, a big challenge for marketers to balance market understanding with consumers' expectation. In reality, majority of Indian market is operated by SME and they mainly operate in small scale market with small market segmentation. Therefore, we have to find out the best option for SME and mass of consumers who do not avail digital buying as also which aspect needs to be developed and focused upon by the marketers to cover this broad range.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted intocomplete lockdown of economic activities for more than a few couple of months in India. Indian economy got badly affected as there were scarcity and disruption in global networks of physical supply chains. Consequently, both the market and economy became unstable (Chowdhury et al., 2020). Lot of industries, where digital operation was quite difficult (for instance, tourism, fashion, education and food, allied industries and others who are very closely associated with seasonality), got badly affected as they were unable to predict this situation. Under this circumstance, marketers are giving more emphasis to digital practices rather than physical buying. There are numerous researchesthat are being conducted to develop a strong model for online marketers in order to build trust, faith and loyalty to consumers(Bronner&Hoog, 2010). Consumers' trust can be communicated in different ways by the companies, for example, through social media, forum, blogs, and reviews, where they can give their opinion about their experiences.This has a strong impact on their purchase decision and information gathering (Powers et al., 2012). The pandemic hastaken customers from the normal to new normal paradigm by accelerating business in digital platform. Nowadays, there are several techniques used by the marketers to develop consumers' confidence in the form of trust, convenience, ease-of-use, 24-hours operationsetc. These has enhanced consumers' expectation and accentuated a permanent shift from offline to online (Hoekstra et al., 2020). A combination of social and traditional media platforms offer more opportunities to consumers in their selection process and develop their confidence (De Vries et al., 2017). Moreover, through the use of modern tools like machine learning, artificial intelligence and IOT, marketers are predicting personalized ideas and preferences of consumers and hence are trying to develop a bonding with customers (Steimer, 2020, p. 51).

Marketing through digital platforms have lot many advantages as in, it reduces consumer search, ability to review right product in a short span, compare products and reduce consumer searching cost (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Simester, 2011; Oestreicher-Singer &Sundararajan, 2012). If we compare distribution system of digital and conventional marketing, we can findbetter service and prompt distribution provided by digital platform at a lower cost. This is undoubtedly, an USP of digital platforms as opposed to traditional offline marketing (Farronato & Fradkin, 2018; Hall & Krueger, 2018). It also helps small and medium firms to utilize suitable business strategies for their surveillance and use low cost distribution channels to reach their target

group (Einav, Farronato, & Levin, 2016; Chen et al., 2019b).

In the post COVID era, it is expected that market trends are going to shift from offline to online. Therefore, marketers are giving more attention to design better customer retention strategies because this will help them gain in competitive marketing (Tsai et al., 2007).In online mode, it is easier to track customer satisfaction level(Khalifa& Liu, 2007) since it is less time consuming and cost effective from customers' side to select product/services provided by marketers(Devarajet al., 2002).It is a very vital job for the consumers to develop their mind set towards purchase decision following search alternatives(Kotler, 1997). However, this is quite difficult in the online buying process since here customers depend on product information rather than physical contact. Therefore, appropriate mode of communication plays a major role in online marketing(McKinney, 2002).

On the other hand, security is another important issue of concernwhich includes confidentiality of personal information and electronic transaction done by the customers (Guoet al., 2012). Generally, consumers use different modes of online payments like internet banking, debit card, credit card etc, for their purchase where they use personal information for their transaction. In this regard, it is imperative that these information must be kept secured and fortunately, most online marketers are very much careful about privacy and security (Chellappa, 2002; Mustafa, 2011). This processhelps developtrust and loyalty of consumers towards online marketers(Lim et al., 2004).

Apart from the aforementioned factors, there are lot of others components as well that changes consumers' perception of online buying, for instance, product delivery services by the company (Ulaga, 2003). Packaging, delivery time, quality and quantity of products make a significant impact on online buying. Consumers have this general expectation that they could receive good quality product without any defect and that also at right time (Patterson, 1993). Previous research suggests that consumers tend to compare online products with their offline purchase habits (Lin et al., 2011). Normally, consumers have high levels of expectation regarding online product quality because prices of online products are generally less than store products (Maxwell, 2001; Chen 2003). If marketers can maintain their uniformity towards quality, price and performance of products, than it will help to develop their USP (Keeney, 1999) and foster stronglypositive perception of customers towards online buying (Patterson,1993). Designing sales promotions within the right time influences consumers to buy product online and it is a common practice followed by online market to attract customers (Biswas& Blair, 1991).

From the above discussion, it is quite clear that whatever be the mode of marketing process, customer satisfaction is the mantra for success of business. In context of online business, marketers always try to develop customers' faith in terms of developing trust, loyalty, security in transaction and information, distribution channels, pricing, quality and promotion. Our present study is an attempt to explore the above issues in a factor analytic approach.

MECHANISM OF THE STUDY

As we know, rural India significantly differs from urban India in every sphere of operations and in the same way a large corporate differs from SME. In this connection, we have taken a step to judge the difficulties faced by consumers, who have very little understanding about online marketing, yet forced by the pandemic to use digital platform in their way of living. On the other side, small firms incur huge losses because they were not using digital mode until now. Although digital platform is indispensable for business in the present context, both the consumers and small firms have been trying to develop resistance to the new mode. Therefore, a lot of doubts arose in front of them regarding digital system and its operations. Marketers are constantly refreshing the ideas, thoughts and processes which make the consumers more confident. In contrast, small firms are trying to enter in this process for creating their niche in the market. Review of literature also revealed that small firms also can take advantage of modern tools like machine learning to understand their customer behaviour and can design their market strategies. Looking into these issues, our present study attempts to examine the acceptance of digital mode of buying in the non-urban areas where exposure of the consumers is comparatively less. So this study will try to identify the benefits of digital platform and to pinpoint those areas that need more focus to cover a broader customer base.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine whether there is any significant difference in the general perception towards online shopping with respect to the gender and education of online shoppers.

2. To identify the most effective parameters of general perception towards online shopping.

METHOD

Participants: 185 adults(53.8% males and 46.2% females) residing in the non-urban areas of North and South Parganas part of West Bengal participated in the study.

Tools: Data were collected using a questionnaire containing several questions about shopper's thought, ideas and preferences towards online marketing. There were three parts of the questionnaire: (a) General information about participants (age, gender, education etc.); (b) A set of five questions concerning the shopping convenience, price, saved time, choices and availability in online shopping; and (c) A set of 19 questions concerning the trust, price and other subjective factors that influence online shopping. For the first set of questions, responses were collected using a 3-point scale where 1 indicated "Disagree" and 3 indicated "Highly Agree". For the second set of questions, responses were collected using a 5-point rating scale where 1 indicated "Strongly agree" and 5 indicated "Strongly disagree".

Procedure: Subjects were approached with the questionnaire after obtaining informed consent from them. Data collection was completed from June to September 2020, which is during the pandemic, to identify the real issues faced by the consumers on online purchasing.

Statistical Analyses: Data were analyzed using Descriptive statistics, Chi-square analysisand Principal Component Analysis to fulfil the research objectives.

RESULTS

Objective 1: To examine whether there is any significant difference in the general perception towards online shopping with respect to gender and education of online shoppers:

To test this hypothesis, chi-square analysis was done for each of the parameters namely, shopping convenience, price, saved time, choices and availability in online shopping with respect to gender and education.

Mean and SD for the ratings given for each of the parameters as per the gender and education of participants, show a higher inclination towards a favourable response for online shopping (Table 1 & 2). In all cases, participants highly agreed on that online shopping offer more convenience, better price and greater choices and availability as well as saves time too.

Chi-square analysis further validated this pattern in response. There are no significant differences among the male and female participants with respect to their agreement about shopping convenience, price, saved time, choices and availability in online shopping ($p>0.0001$). No significant differences in agreement also do exist across the participants belonging to different educational background as well (Table 1 & 2). This indicates that there is unanimous agreement across participants of different gender and educational background regarding their agreement about the parameters of online shopping.

Table. 1 Chi-square test showing the significance of association between different parameters of online shopping with respect to Gender (N=186)

	Gender	Shopping Convenience	Price	Saved time	Choices	Availability
Mean	*Male*	2.50	2.44	2.67	2.61	2.60
	Female	2.56	2.57	2.72	2.58	2.54
SD	*Male*	0.65	0.68	0.58	0.62	0.62
	Female	0.58	0.61	0.52	0.66	0.67
Chi -square Value		0.36	1.50	0.64	0.71	0.44
df		2	2	2	2	2
p-value		0. 83	0. 47	0. 73	0. 70	0. 80

Table. 2 Chi-square test showing the significance of association between different parameters of online shopping with respect to Education (N=186)

	Education	Shopping Convenience	Price	Saved time	Choices	Availability
Mean	Graduate	2.54	2.50	2.70	2.61	2.60
	Postgraduate & above	2.51	2.51	2.70	2.57	2.50
SD	Graduate	0.63	0.66	0.56	0.62	0.63
	Postgraduate & above	0.58	0.62	0.54	0.68	0.69
Chi -square Value		1.63	0.84	0.07	0.45	0.96
df		2	2	2	2	2
p-value		0.44	0.66	0.96	0.80	0.62

Table 3. Rotated Matrix showing the two components of Online preference extracted through Principal Component Analysis (N=186).

	General Online preference	Festive Online preference
Distribution system	0.872	
Payment system	0.868	
Variety in products	0.824	
Product description	0.810	
Refund policy	0.805	
24-Hours operations	0.784	
Purchasing system	0.778	
Visibility of products	0.735	
User friendly	0.723	
Layout of website	0.717	
Buying anytime	0.700	
Free Delivery	0.699	
Return policy	0.670	
Advantage of pricing	0.644	
Discounts in transaction	0.597	
Cheaper than offline	0.565	
Buying during festive season		0.882
Discounts in online shopping		0.841
Cheaper price offered		0.622

Objective 2: To identify the most effective parameters of general perception towards online shopping

To explore the most effective parameters of general perception towards online shopping, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was done. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure was found to be 0.948, indicating sampling adequacy for conducting PCA. The data is also found to be suitable for reduction, as indicated by the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

PCA extracted two components, explaining 63.80% of the total variance. Out of the 19 parameters (Table 3), 16 parameters loaded on the first component and 3 parameters loaded on the second component. The 16 parameters are namely distribution, payment system, variety, product description, refund policy, 24-hours operation, purchasing system, product visibility, user friendly, website layout, anytime buying, free delivery, return policy, advantages in online shopping, transaction discount and cheaper than online in decreasing order of importance placed on each of these parameters.This component is therefore named General Online preference. The three other parameters loading on the second component are buying during festive season, discount and cheaper price. This component is therefore named Festive Online Preference. The factor loadings for each of the parameters indicate that the buyers placed the highest importance on the distribution, payment system and variety offered by the online shopping system. The first component extracted explained 47.11% of total variance while the second component explained 16.67% of total variance.

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic helped develop the capability of online marketers to anticipate consumers' buying behaviour. This rather, will facilitate fostering the core competencies and make a sustainable competitive advantage in association with sales, satisfaction and return as also willbe instrumental for small firms to cover their small sphere business environment (Souriet al., 2017). In the present study, we do not find any significant association between different demographic classification of respondents and perception of the consumer towards online preferences. In digital environment, speed, relevance and complexity help marketer to develop strong bonding within consumers' minds (Jung, 2009). Digital transformation and its' success depends upon certain basic components like service quality and delivery, ease of use and handling system, convenience rather than complex operation, security, operational efficiency, balance between quality, quantity, price and communication. These functions motivate consumers and change their perception, trust and belief towards online buying and process (Beheshti&Beheshti, 2010).

In fact, the performance of online marketers not only affects basic components of offering but also depends on how they personalize their approach to consumers. This help develop values like reliability towards information, flexibility in offering, availability of products, refund policy and response time in emergency (Sederaet al., 2013). It is also noted that the habit of purchasing from stores is getting reduced gradually. Therefore, marketers need to clearly differentiate between consumers' planned and unplanned buying habit (Sheth, 2020). In a similar fashion, we also observed drastic changes in the buying behaviour of the consumers getting converted from offline to online mode. There are also studies, where it has been reflected that online buying preferences depend on the demographic characteristics of the consumers,especially from diverse education background (Shahzadet al., 2020).

However, the present study had an exploratory approach and the findings show that online buying does not depend on gender and educational background. In contrast, our study findings have revealedthat there are certain significant factorsthat orient the consumers towards online buying preferences. These are distribution system, product variety, payment system, product descriptions, refund policy and 24-hours operations etc. These factors are the common characteristics of general online buying. The result also delineates that consumers' perception and expectation differs with the nature of buying. The results clearly hinttowards different expectations from the respondents on buying during festive session. Here, it is noted that factors like discounted price, cheaper price and festive mood can enhance online buying habit of consumers.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Marketing through online platform is an emerging issuefor the marketers and researchers. There has been continuous research that is going on both at the corporate and academic levels. Online marketing and its' customers are limited within a boundary. If the online mode of buying can reach to all levels of marketers, then it is imperative forthe small and medium firms to maintain certain steps. The results of this study highlighted certain issues which are important to get success in this part of the country where people have less exposure and trust towards online marketing and its' applications. This paper will give an insight to small and medium firms to ponder and plan about their marketing strategies in the new normal conditions. If marketers can take

into account the abovementioned parametersfor customers across different demographic classification, then it may help them to create a new pathway in connection with the old traditional approach to buying.

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