

ADAPTING THE MARKETING MIX: A CROSS-ANALYSIS OF INDIAN COMPANIES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 FOR CUSTOMER RETENTION

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected millions of lives worldwide. As of September 2020, World Health Organization (2020a) reported almost 29 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 900,000 deaths globally. The outbreak started in China in January and quickly spread to other countries. The United States accounts for the most positive cases with more than 6 million people infected currently. Due to the nature of the virus, it easily spreads from human contact, many countries have banned travelling, closed non-essential business and even put out stay-at-home orders. The economy is suffering from the effects of the pandemic and it is not correlated to high health impacts. Regardless of income level and impact level from COVID-19, many countries are experiencing recession (Cantore, Hartwich, Lavopa, Haverkamp, Laplane & Rodousakis 2020).

This health crisis has influenced consumers to change their behaviors abruptly. Many businesses face difficulties altering how they usually work, from supply chain to resourcing to marketing. Companies must adapt their marketing strategy to the new needs and demands of their customers, to minimize the risks and capture any possible advantages. A research study on the impact of a pandemic on the economy and what changes have been made to marketing strategy is necessary.

1.2 Research objectives

The research objective is to provide an understanding of how marketing strategy changes during and after the pandemic. The thesis focuses on the shift to e-commerce and digital marketing and their results. The study aims to answer three main research questions, which are *“How does the pandemic impact on customer behavior?”*, *“How do marketers adapt their marketing strategy in current situation?”*, *“What is the future for marketing plans post-pandemic?”*.

1.3 Thesis structure

Following the introduction, the next chapter overviews the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic impact of the outbreak is discussed thoroughly since it is the main focus of the thesis.

Customer behavior changed significantly during the pandemic, which will be the topic of chapter three. The fourth chapter explores the theoretical framework, including the definition of marketing strategy, comparison between traditional and digital marketing. This chapter also explains the marketing strategy mix (4P), which is the foundation for marketers to develop new adaptation during the pandemic. The empirical study will present and analyze the data collected from the qualitative research method. Interviewees are anticipated to be experts in marketing field and able to provide insights on the matter of the thesis topic. The thesis ends with a conclusion chapter that consists of the summary of the research, discussion for further study and limitations.

2 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SITUATION

2.1 Background information

WHO (2020b) defined the Coronavirus disease (also known as COVID-19 disease) is “an infectious disease caused by the newly discovered coronavirus”. The new virus has been named as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) by WHO. In December 2019, the virus was first identified in Wuhan, China. It is thought to have an animal origin, especially from bats, because a few early infected patients had visited the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market (Sun, He, Wang, Lai, Ji, Zhai, Li, Suchard, Tian, Zhou, Veit & Su 2020). It usually takes from 2 to 14 days for symptoms to appear after exposure to virus. People who are infected have reported a vary of symptoms, from mild symptoms to severe illness. A few common symptoms of this disease are fever, dry cough, fatigue, headache, loss of smell or taste, etc. Emergency warning signs are trouble breathing, consistent pain or pressure in chest, inability to wake or stay awake, bluish lips or face (CDC 2020a). After almost 200,000 infected with the virus and more than 4000 people died, WHO (2020c) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020.

The virus spreads from people to people in many ways, especially when they are in close proximity. It can transmit through saliva or droplets when the infected person breathes, talks, coughs, sneezes or sings. These transmissions are most easily happened in crowded and poor ventilated indoor spaces, such as night clubs, restaurants, public transport, or gatherings such as funeral. Heavier droplets fell on the ground or other surfaces also contain the virus. If a person touches the contaminated surface with their hand and then their eyes, nose or mouth without properly cleaning their hands, they have a possibility to be infected with the virus too, albeit this is less common. People remain infectious for up to 14 days. Even patients without symptoms are still likely to transmit the virus without knowing (WHO 2020d).

It is quite difficult to precisely assess how lethal the new virus is. It appears that it has a less fatal rate than the coronaviruses that caused SARS or MERS, but significantly more dangerous than the seasonal flu (Sheikh & Rabin 2020). Even though most people who were diagnosed with COVID-19 recovered, as of September 17, 2020 there are approximately 937,000 deaths globally reported to WHO (2020a). This statistic equals to a mortality rate of 3.1% (937,391 deaths to 29,737,453 cases), which is much higher than the initial estimation of 2% by WHO. 94% of people who died because of COVID-19 have at least one underlying health condition that contributes to the severeness of the case (CDC 2020b).



Name	Cases - cumulative total	Cases - newly reported in last 24 hours	Deaths - cumulative total	Deaths - newly reported in last 24 hours	Transmission Classification
Global	29,737,453	292,307	937,391	6,057	
 United States...	6,530,324 	34,078	194,434	940	Community transmission
 India	5,118,253 	97,894	83,198	1,132	Clusters of cases
 Brazil	4,382,263 	36,653	133,119	1,113	Community transmission
 Russian Fede...	1,085,281 	5,762	19,061	144	Clusters of cases
 Peru	738,020 	4,160	30,927	115	Community transmission

Figure 1. Number of total cases, total deaths, new cases and deaths globally of selected 5 countries on 17 September 2020 (WHO 2020a).

Currently, there has not been an effective treatment or vaccine for this disease. Patients with mild symptoms are advised to drink plenty of fluids or rest until their immune system heals themselves. Potential treatments are being tested on patients. One of them is an antiviral medication called remdesivir, which is found to be effective on animals. Other treatments are only to support the patients by ensuring they have enough oxygen to breath and maintaining their fever. Vaccines are still under development by scientists at the National Institutes of Health and other organizations (Sheikh et. al 2020).

CDC (2020c) recommends a set of measures to prevent the disease includes hand washing, public distancing (at least 6ft or 2m), wearing face masks, disinfecting frequent used area. Responses from governments have varied, depending on the country's situation. In China, they put a lockdown order on Wuhan city, where the outbreak started. This means people cannot enter or leave the city until the situation is contained (Cyranoski 2020). Prime Minister of Britain, on the other hand, imposed a controversial policy of letting the virus spread as much as possible to have a herd immunity. However, this policy has failed tremendously, resulting in an order of lockdown in March. Many other countries also put out extensive restrictions on their borders, banned public gatherings and ordered quarantine for citizens to mitigate the outbreak (Hjelmgaard 2020).

2.2 “The New Normal” – After the pandemic

Even though there are various treatments that are being tested, scientists are not expecting to have a vaccine for COVID-19 until 2021. Governments are under financial pressure to reopen their economies with cautions from health experts. This has led to people must get used to a new lifestyle and habits as the threat of the second wave of Coronavirus outbreak is still viable. Researchers have recommended a set of measures to ensure safety when the economy is slowly open again, which defines “the new normal”.

2.2.1 Mandatory face masks

Jeremy Howard, a research scientist from University of San Francisco, along with 100 top academics of the world have written an open letter asking U.S. governors to require wearing cloth masks in public places to halt the spread of Coronavirus. They have found evidence that supports the idea that face masks help prevent transmitting COVID-19 from droplets (Howard 2020). Most countries now have face mask recommendations and some even mandate wearing masks when going outside. Mask usage rate of a country depends on how well the outbreaks in their country have been contained, rules from their governments and mask-wearing practice before the pandemic. For example, China, Hong Kong and Japan were used to wearing masks in public and quickly elevated their usage rate when the outbreaks started. Other countries like Singapore, Germany and Italy adopted the practice quickly after the governments mandate wearing masks. Restaurant and retail chains in the U.S. such as Walmart, McDonald's and Starbucks have required their customers to wear masks in their establishments (He & Laurent 2020). Face masks have slowly become a necessity in people's daily lives.

However, wearing a mask is still a controversial topic in many countries, especially the U.S. Many Americans follow advice from public health administrations and wear masks in public. On the other hand, some are aggressively against this movement as they deemed it limits their individual freedom. A Pew Research Center (2020) survey showed that Democrats are more likely to wear masks than Republicans. This is the result of Democratic leaders stressing the importance of face masks, meanwhile some Republican representatives such as Donald Trump have refused wearing a mask until recently. Mask usage has become a divisive matter and a political choice for some people (Aratani 2020).

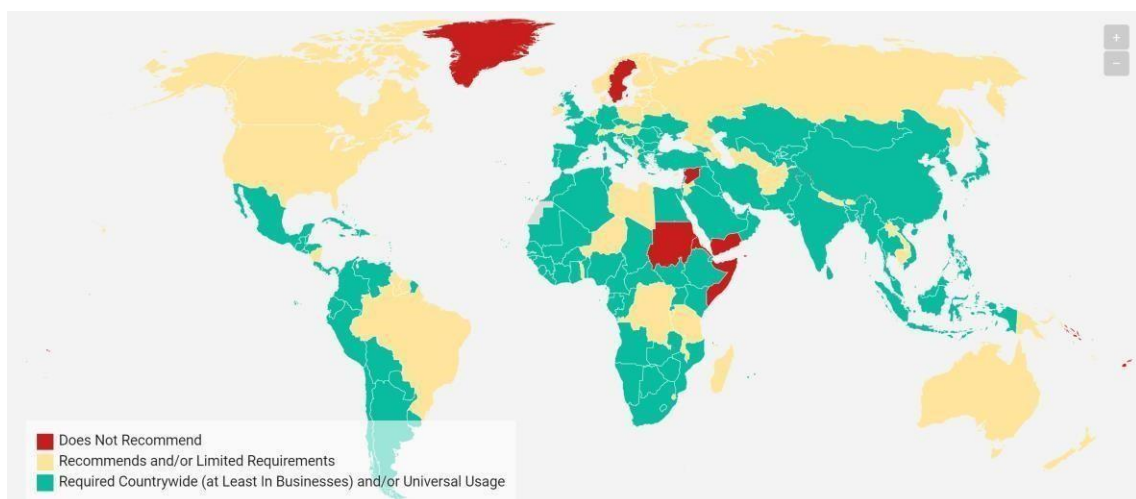


Figure 2. Mask-wearing requirements global map as of September 22, 2020 (Mask4All 2020).

2.2.2 Social distancing

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020d) have advised limiting face-to-face contact to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Social distancing has proven to be effective in slowing the virus outbreak in combination with other preventive methods. When going out in public, it is crucial to keep at least a 6-foot or 2-meter distance from others as the virus is mainly spread among people who have prolonged close contact (CDC 2020d). As lockdown orders are starting to ease in many countries, many businesses have practiced social distancing to reopen their establishments safely. Restaurants, nightclubs, museums and other entertainment venues have to work differently. For example, across England prohibits these venues to open after 10 p.m. from 24 September 2020. They also must follow safety guidance from the government such as a group can only have 6 people or less, allow social distancing between customers. Other countries have made their rules stricter to minimize the risk of having another outbreak. Scotland is currently not allowing people to visit other households or private indoor spaces (BBC 2020a). After experiencing a surge in new cases in August, South Korean government immediately reimposed banning public gatherings of 100 people, restricting indoor meetings of 50 people, closing down facilities with high risks of infection (KBS 2020).

Researchers have found that social distancing might continue well into 2021 or 2022. They have ruled out different scenarios for the pandemic progress and unless the vaccine is invented, a one-time social distancing effort will not be effective enough to control the pandemic (Roberts 2020). It is expected that social distancing will be “the new normal” for everyone.

2.2.3 Remote work

As social distancing has become an effective measure to contain the spread of COVID-19, governments across the world has encouraged people to work from home if possible. As a result, 59 countries have implemented remote working for non-essential employees in mid-April (ILO 2020). This is a strategy to reduce job losses and maintain the work of many industries. Remote work is a part of “The New Normal” as long as social distancing is still effective.

Teleworking is not a new practice in history. A research from European Union’s Joint Research Centre found that telework slowly increased in the last 10 years in EU-27, prior to COVID-19. This practice was adopted by self-employed more often than dependent employees (European Union 2020). The opportunity to telework depends on occupations and sectors. In both EU-27 and the U.S., professionals who work in knowledge- and ICT-intensive services are more used to teleworking (JRC

2020; Desilver 2020). **Figure 3** and **Figure 4** have shown that “white collar” workers have more access to teleworking, even prior to the pandemic. These professional workers either mostly do their work on their computers like managers and software developers or can control their own work schedule like lawyers. Pew Research Center also found that 12% of employees in larger firms with more than 500 employees have the option to telework, compared to only 6% at firms with less than 100 employees. The “knowledge workers” has become the dominant teleworkers in many organizations when social distancing becomes a must. The British Office for National Statistics found that 46.6% of people in employment have done some kind of work at home in April 2020, during the COVID19 lockdown. A recent report showed 25% of U.S. workforce are able to work at home (Ellison 2020). Most of them are white collar workers, whose jobs rely mainly on computers but not public interaction (Baker 2020).

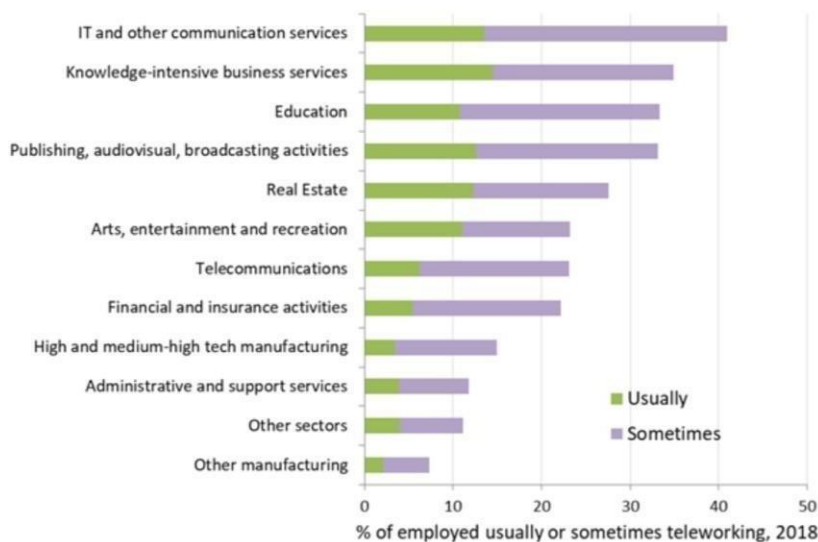


Figure 1: Prevalence of telework by sector, EU-27

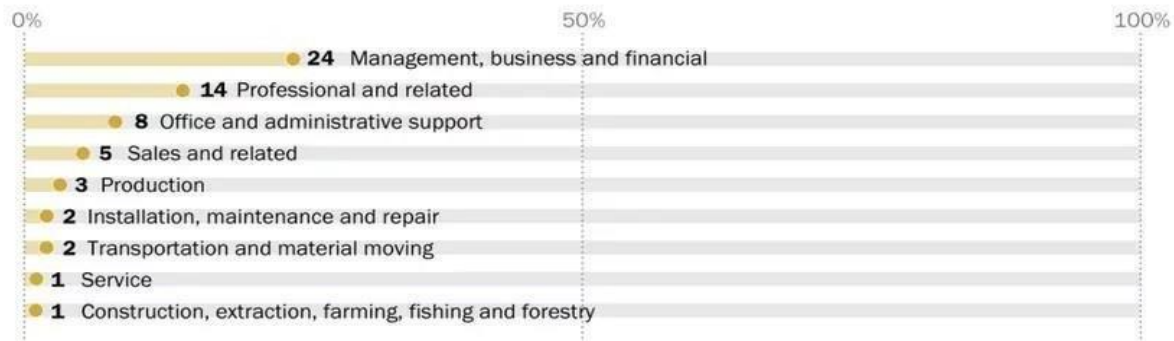
Note: The group “Knowledge-intensive business services” includes the following sectors: Legal and Accounting Activities - Activities of Head Offices; Management Consultancy Activities - Architectural and Engineering Activities; Technical Testing and Analysis - Scientific Research and Development - Advertising and Market Research - Other Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities. The group IC and other communication services include: Computer Programming, Consultancy and Related Activities - Information Service Activities.

Source: JRC calculations from ad-hoc extractions of EU-LFS data provided by Eurostat

Figure 3. Prevalence of telework by sector in EU-27 in 2018 (European Union 2020).

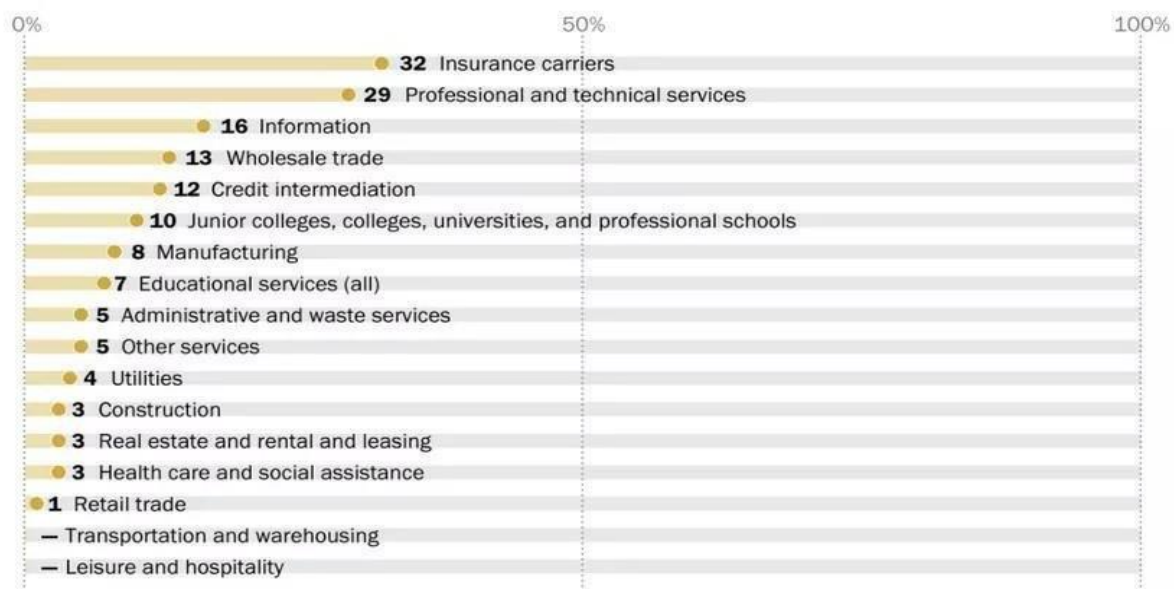
Access to telework in U.S. private sector varies by occupation ...

In 2019, by selected occupational groups



... by industry

In 2019, by selected industry groups



... and by size of employer

In 2019, by number of employees



Note: Dash means that either no workers were in this category or that data did not meet BLS's publication criteria.

Source: 2019 National Compensation Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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Figure 4. Access to telework in the U.S. private sector by selected occupational groups, by industry and by size of employer in 2019 (Pew Research Center 2019).

On the other hand, due to the nature of elementary and manual occupations, many employees are not able to telework. For instance, service-related jobs such as waitress, hairdresser or hospitality and constructions workers have a hard time adjusting to the new way of working. The majority of these workers have to deal with job disruption like layoffs, furloughs or reduced work hours during the pandemic. They also have a higher risk to be infected with the coronavirus. Around 108 million workers in the U.S. belong to this sector and 18.9% of them might not be able to go back to their job even after the pandemic (Ellison 2020).

The pandemic has highlighted the benefits of remote working for both employees and employers. A study from Lenovo revealed that 63% of the surveyed global workforce feel that they are more productive when working at home than in the office. 52% respondents would like to continue work from home, even when social distancing is not relevant anymore (Lenovo 2020). A survey from CBRE, a large commercial real estate firm, has revealed a shift in expectation from their clients. **Figure 5** exhibits 70% of their clients are expecting to fuse remote work into their usual business practice postpandemic, whereas only 37% allow working outside the office before COVID-19 (Clemons 2020). Many tech giants have extended their flexible workplace policy long-term, such as Facebook, Google, Spotify employees can work remotely until the end of 2020 (Harper 2020).

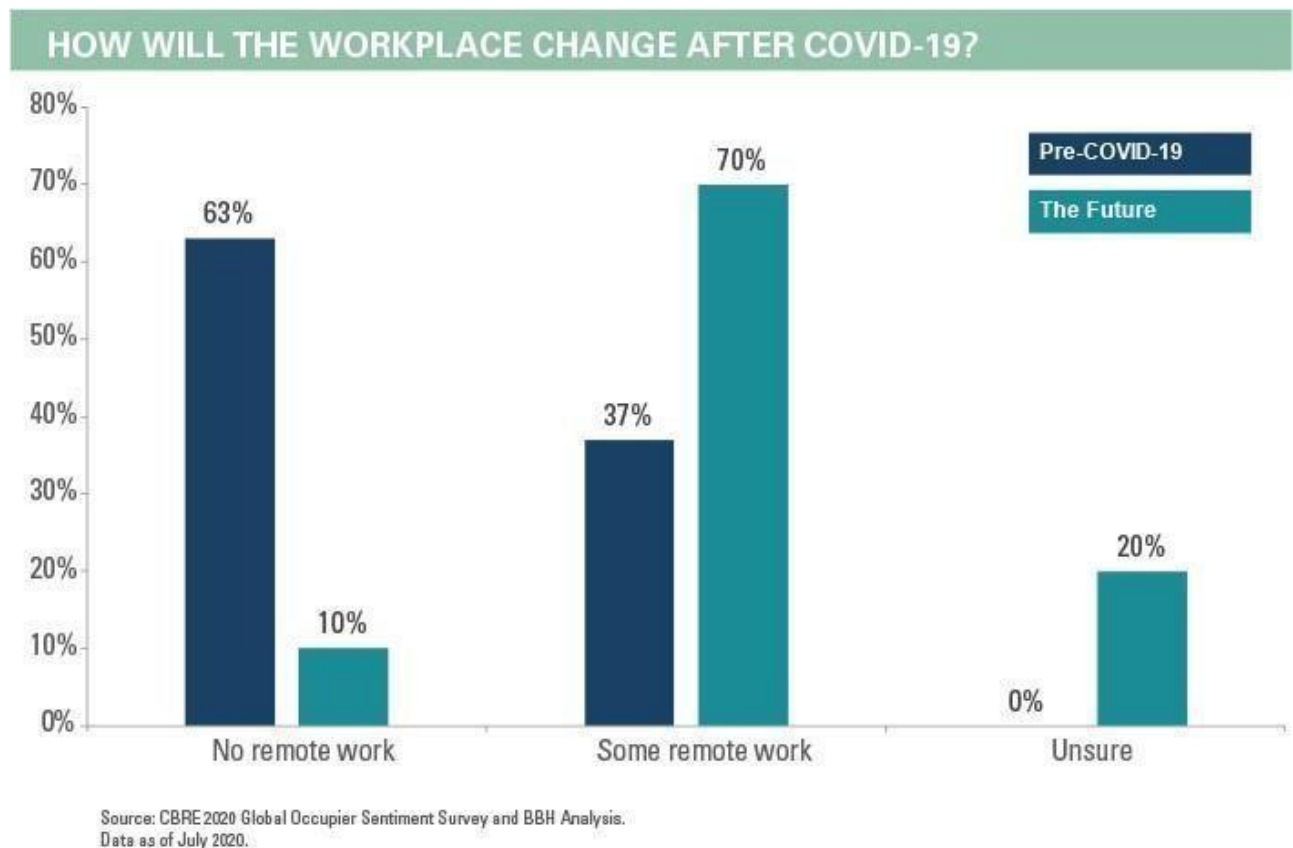


Figure 5. Expectations of CBRE's 126 clients about the future of work (Clemons 2020).

2.3. Economic impact

Besides the significant impact on human's health, the COVID-19 pandemic has also put the world's economy in crisis. The recession is not necessarily related to the health impact of the pandemic. Many countries with low COVID-19 impact also show signs of recession, according to the report of UNIDO (Cantore et. al. 2020). It is not limited to any industries that have been affected by the COVID-19 recession, albeit there are industries that more vulnerable than others.

The OECD (2020a) reported the sharpest fall in GDP of G20 area of 3.4% in the first quarter of 2020. This is the most significant decrease in GDP since the time series started in 1998. For a comparison, the GDP only fell 1.5% even when the financial crisis in 2009 were at the bottom. This has shown the powerful impact level of the COVID-19 pandemic to the world's economy. Countries who introduced lockdown measures earlier suffered from larger contraction in GDP. For example, China saw a decrease of 9.8% in the first quarter of 2020 and the largest annual fall of 6.8% among G20 countries (OECD 2020a).

The recession affects all industries, however, not all industries are affected at the same level. The stock markets are experiencing their biggest quarterly drop ever, even worse than the 2008 economic crisis. The FTSE and Dow Jones Industrial Average reported a quarterly fall of 25% and 23% respectively (Weiss 2020). UNIDO reported 58% share of firms in textile and apparel industry expecting extreme drop in profits. 29% of firms in this industry were also considering a 25% or more employees cut. The chemical and plastic industry expects to be the least affected in the COVID-19 pandemic (UNIDO 2020a).

Different industries are facing different problems. **Figure 6** shows two most common major problems that vary industries facing are decrease in demand and wage payment for their employees. Other concerns include logistics problems, difficulty in financing and valuechain disruptions.

	Problem faced (ordered by share of firms reporting it)				
	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Food processing</i>	Payment of wages (57%)	Fall in demand (54%)	Difficulty in financing (34%)	Valuechain disruptions (29%)	Logistics problems (23%)
<i>Textiles and apparel</i>	Payment of wages (74%)	Fall in demand (71%)	Logistics problems (35%)	Difficulty in financing (34%)	Value chain disruptions (17%)
<i>Basic materials</i>	Fall in demand (73%)	Payment of wages (69%)	Difficulty in financing (36%)	Valuechain disruptions (32%)	Logistics problems (18%)
<i>Chemicals, rubber and plastics (inc Petroleum)</i>	Fall in demand (69%)	Payment of wages (61%)	Valuechain disruptions (35%)	Difficulty in financing (32%)	Logistics problems (22%)
<i>Machinery, electronics and transport equipment</i>	Fall in demand (69%)	Payment of wages (69%)	Difficulty in financing (30%)	Valuechain disruptions (23%)	Logistics problems (22%)
<i>Other manufacturing</i>	Fall in demand (69%)	Payment of wages (66%)	Difficulty in financing (56%)	Valuechain disruptions (18%)	Logistics problems (15%)
<i>Non-manufacturing</i>	Fall in demand (57%)	Payment of wages (44%)	Difficulty in financing (32%)	Logistics problems (19%)	Value chain disruptions (16%)

Figure 6. Top five concerns across industries in the pandemic (UNIDO elaboration 2020a).

However, during this difficult time, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the growth of ecommerce worldwide. Due to both the restrictions of government and fear of getting the virus, many consumers have chosen to purchase online. Adobe released a report showing how the pandemic has significantly impacted on e-commerce. The total online spending reached \$82.5 billion in May 2020, which is an increase of 77% compared to last year. Digital Insight Manager from Adobe, Vivek Pandya, commented that it should have taken 4 to 6 years to achieve this level of growth normally (Koetsier 2020). The significant shift in demand for offline stores to online stores are common worldwide. In the United States, e-commerce has slowly increased in the past few years, from 9.6% to

11.8% between the first quarter of 2018 and the first quarter of 2020. However, it has spiked up to 16.1% in the second quarter of 2020. A similar development can also be seen in the United Kingdom, where the share of e-commerce in retail rose 17.3% to 20.3% from the first quarter of 2018 to the first quarter of 2020. The share rocketed to 31.3% in the second quarter of 2020 (OECD 2020b). This shift does not only impact temporarily but it is expected to reveal a permanent change to e-commerce.

OECD observed that not all online retailers and industries benefit from this demand shift to ecommerce. For example, United States saw an increase in demand for personal protection items, home activities and groceries but a decrease in travel, sports and formal apparel items. In several other countries such as Germany, South Korea and China, online purchase for groceries and food services all grew significantly during the pandemic. Other sectors that are deemed unnecessary all suffer from low demand. For example, culture and leisure services or travel and transportation arrangements in South Korea declined by 67.8% and 51.6% respectively. Sales of online clothing stores in China also saw a contraction of 16%, after growing steadily in 2018-19 of 23.7% (OECD 2020b).

E-commerce has become one of the key responses to COVID-19 from both end, consumers and suppliers. Many elderly consumers starting to engage with online purchases as to further comply with the social distancing rules might continue with this new habit in the future. A global consumer survey reported an increase of 50% new users (people who has never used the service before) in online grocery shopping in Brazil and South Africa, curbside pickup from restaurants and other stores in United States and several European countries. For the supplier side, larger corporations capitalize on the infrastructure and skills they acquired in their years of business and enhance their e-commerce channels. E-commerce has become a crucial alternative sales channel as many brick-and-mortar stores were forced to shut down by government laws (OECD 2020b). In April 2020, Whole Foods Markets, a grocery branch by Amazon, increased their online order capacity to 60% to meet customer's demand. They also expanded grocery pickup service from 80 to 150 stores (Landry 2020).

3 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

3.1 Consumer behavior conceptual framework

Consumer behavior has been defined as the process of making decision and physical activity including acquiring, evaluating, using and disposing of goods and services (Khan 2006, 4). Author Rajeev Kumra has a more detailed explanation for consumer behavior as “the psychological processes that consumers go through in recognizing needs, finding ways to solve these needs, collect and interpret information, make plans, and implement these plans (...), making purchase decisions and post purchase behavior (...)” (Kumra 2006, 2). Both of these definitions highlighted that consumer behavior is a process that does not simply consist of the act of purchase. It begins much before the consumers bought the product and even how they dispose them is relevant to consumer behavior. During this process, there are various factors that can influence consumers. These factors can be categorized as internal and external influences. Internal influences are factors that present within consumers, therefore, differ from one to another. These include perception, learning and memory, motivation and affect, personality, lifestyle and values (Solomon 2018). Kumra believes internal variables also include age and stage in the life cycle, what consumers do for work and their finances and how they portray themselves. On the other hand, external influences are what affect consumer from the outside. They consist of culture, social environment, reference group, family and social class (Kumra 2006, 13).

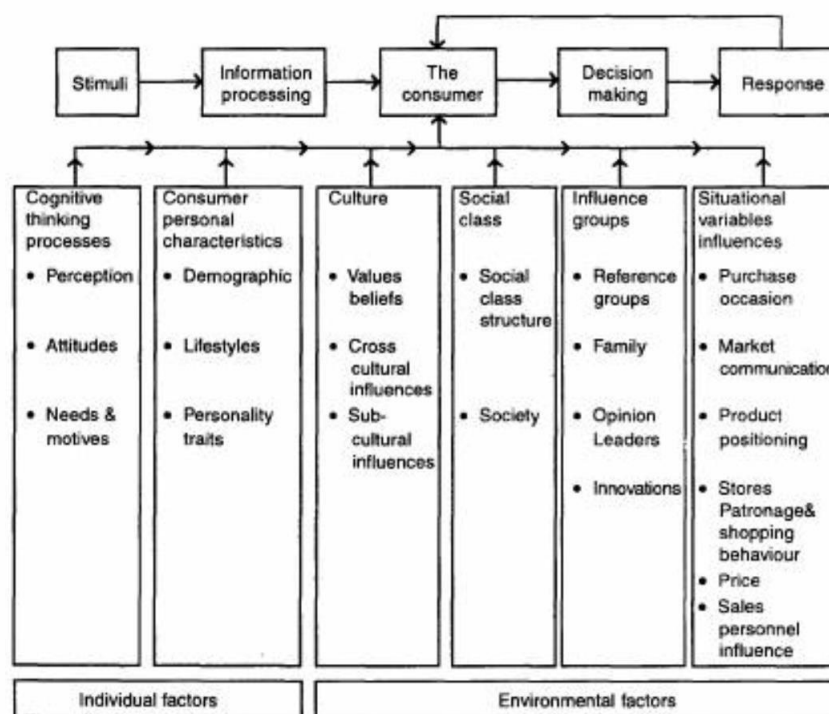


Figure 7. Individual and environmental factors affecting consumer behavior (Assaeli 1987).

Figure 7 specifies a vary of personal and environmental factors that impacting on consumer behavior. The decision-making process starts from the consumer's cognitive thinking. Personal perception, attitudes, needs and motives are what influencing this thought process. One's personal characteristic, such as their demographic, lifestyles and personality, are also considered an internal influence on their buying behavior. External influences, also called environmental or social factors, depend on consumers' value beliefs, cross cultural and sub-cultural impact, social class structure and society, influence groups like reference groups, family, opinion leaders and innovations. The situation where the exchange between consumers and suppliers happens also takes part in what drives consumers to purchase/acquire a product or service (Nair 2008, 6).

For the purpose of this research study on the impact of COVID-19 on consumer behavior and marketing strategy, the thesis focuses mainly on environmental influences resulting from the effects of the pandemic. The thesis discusses these factors and how it has impacted on consumer buying behavior in the next part.

3.2 External influences on consumer behavior

External influences that are analyzed in this study include cultural, social class and influence groups. These social factors do not have a direct impact on consumer behavior, but they will filter slowly through consumer's cognitive thinking and influence the decision-making process (Khan 2006, 26). In this part, the study discusses each external influence further and how it affects consumer behavior.

3.2.1 Culture

Culture is defined as "a complex sum total of knowledge, belief, traditions, customs, art, moral law or any other habit acquired by people as members of society" (Khan 2006, 29). Author Shavitt, Lee and Johnson (2008) believed that culture are standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating and acting that are shared between people who speak the same language, go through a same historical period or share a geographic location. The authors also believed that culture can be learned in different ways (Shavitt et. al. 2008, 1103). A person's behavior is significantly influenced by their cultural settings, including their buying behavior. For example, people in Japan would have a different way of purchasing, using and disposing a product compared to someone from the United States. Therefore, culture has a significant influence on consumer behavior (Khan 2006, 29).

There are sub-cultural and cross-cultural influences within a culture. Author Khan explained subculture as groups or segments of people that have distinct traditions and behaviors, even though they share the same culture. In India, the culture of South India is very different from the North, East and the West for example (Khan 2006, 29).

Author Stephens in her book “Essentials of consumer behavior” has pointed out the 6 dimensions of culture that business textbooks use to distinguish culture and how it affects its people. These 6 dimensions are Power Distance Index, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance Index, Long Term Orientation vs. Short Term Normative Orientation and Indulgence vs. Restraint. However, Stephens also stressed that these dimensions were only used to differentiate cultures originally. They can provide a general overview of what a culture is but does not show how people in that culture really think, feel, or behave (Stephens 2017, 108).

3.2.2 Social class

Social class is usually referred to a group of people who have equal positions in a society. The positions can be evaluated based on a person’s income, education, occupation, etc. People who belong to the same social class tend to prefer and purchase similar products/services. They can have the same interest in housing, vacation destinations, entertainment and other purchases (Khan 2006, 29). Author Kumra stated social class is a sociological concept. By combining the amount of one’s economic wealth, their power/influence over others in society and prestige (degree of recognition in society), researchers would measure one’s social status (Kumra 2006, 253). **Figure 8** shows a more detailed look on how social class is formed and influences behavior. According to author Khan, a person’s social class is evaluated based on 4 main socio-economic factors, which are occupation, education, ownership and income. Social standing can be categorized as Upper Class, Middle Class, Working Class and Lower Class. Each social class performs unique behavior including preferences, purchase, consumptions and communications.

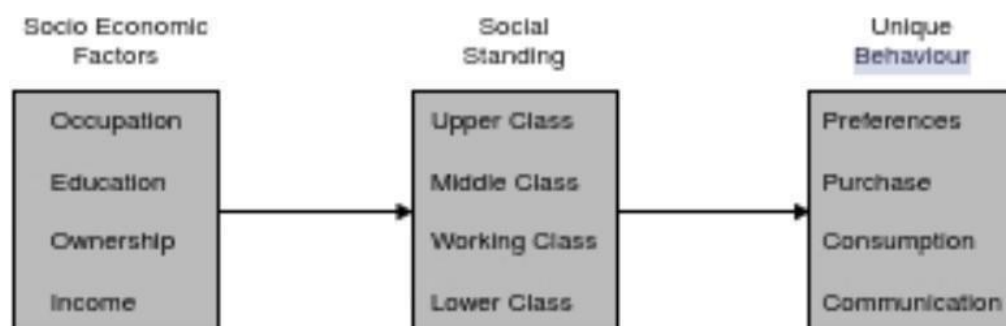


Figure 8. Social class formation and behavior impact (Khan 2006, 50).

People within a social class tend to have a similar behavior pattern. Social class is usually permanent lasting on families, therefore, resulting in an impact on people's lifestyles, status, interests and behaviors. Marketers have observed that people among a social class are more likely to share similar attitudes and behavior pattern, while there is a difference between social classes. For instance, a person from the middle class would choose to buy a car from the mid-price range that fit his budget. On the other hand, an upper-class person would purchase a much more luxury car to indicate his wealth and status. This difference also applies in many sectors such as shoes, men/women's clothing, etc. (Nair 2008, 175).

3.2.3 Influence groups

Authors Martin Khan and Suja R. Nair both defined social groups consisting of two individuals or more. Members within a group would share norms, values or beliefs and their behavior is interdependent on each other (Khan 2006, 58; Nair 2008, 199). Kumra stated what differentiates a group from other forms of collection of people is that they relate to each other after interacting and more importantly, share a common goal (Kumra 2006, 212).

When an individual joins a group, they have to follow the set standards and norms that the groups already have. This is how social groups can affect consumer behavior. Influence group, also known as reference group, is a person or a group of people whom you seek advice from when making purchase decision. Consumer behavior is influenced because of the aspirations that these reference groups built and help a particular person achieve desired lifestyle. One must adopt the attitudes and values from the group that he/she is a member in and therefore, tends to purchase and use the products that other members from their group approve (Khan 2006, 58).

There are many types of reference groups that can greatly affect one's attitudes and behaviors. Normative reference group would influence general values and beliefs of a person. For example, a kid's normative reference group would be his family. He would slowly learn and develop his consumer behavior from his family members. Another important reference group is comparative reference group. This is a collection of people whom one would compare themselves to and evaluate their own status (Nair 2008, 215). There is also aspirational reference group, or also known as indirect reference group. They could be people who do not necessarily know in real life, such as successful businesspeople, actors, performers. However, their fans can be influenced to imitate their lifestyles, how they dress or even how they carry a social message, etc. There is no surprise that a lot of brands choose the most popular stars at the time to adopt a new set of customers for this reason (Solomon 2018, 417). Another noticeable reference group is avoidance group. Author Solomon stated that this

is when one may carefully study behaviors and preferences from a group that they dislike, then do their best to do the opposite of those. This could happen in a school when students do not want to be deemed as nerds or weirdos. Children in family also exhibit these behaviors to their parents, in order to prove their independency (Solomon 2018, 418).

Donald W. Hendon did a research called “A New empirical look at the influence of Reference groups on Generic product category and brand choice: Evidence from Two Nations”, where he surveyed 200 people to understand how reference groups affect their buying decisions. Hendon observed that as products go through their life cycle, product choice that was based on group influence also changes. In the introductory stage, customers are easily influenced by their groups to make the buying decision but not the brand choice. Then, both brand choice and product choice are significantly influenced in the growth stage. When the product reaches maturity stage, customers are now only affected on brand choice. Finally, in the decline stage, the study stated that the group influence is weak to both brand and product choice (Nair 2008, 217). This has shown how much influence reference groups can have on customers buying decisions.

3.3 Emergency purchasing and stockpiling behavior during COVID-19

Epidemics throughout history have shown that they evoked fear and irrational actions from people. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different when multiple reports stated worldwide emergency purchasing and stockpiling particular items. Whitten (2020) reported people purchase items based on their most urgent needs when dealing with the pandemic and stay-at-home orders, which are selfprotection such as hand sanitizers, masks, gloves; entertainment like board games, puzzles or video games also become popular; to connect with other people is also one of the basic needs. Additionally, many have chosen to stockpile canned goods and bottled water, medical supplies like cold medicine and thermometers. According to Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist, humans follow their first instinct to gain control over threatening situations by hoarding food items (Whitten 2020).

The COVID-19 recovery and infection rate has become quite unpredictable for many countries. Consumers demand also vary according to these rates in different countries and categories. Aull, Kuijpers, Sawaya & Vallöf (2020) observed that many consumers purchase fruit over beer but return to beer and snacks a few days later when they understand they have to stay home for a long period. They also reported the demand shift drastically in Italy before the country went into lockdown. Besides an increasing demand for cleaning and safety products such as sanitizing alcohol, tissues, etc., people also shift to long-shelf-life products like pasta, flour, rice, frozen food. Discretionary products such as sweets, baking mix, cosmetics and salty snacks saw a significant decrease in demand

(Aull et. al. 2020). Anastasiadou, Chrissos Anestis, Karantza and Vlachakis (2020) found that customers are more likely to hoard low-cost products or there is very little damage to customers to hoard these products or if they are not confident they can get these products later. GAIN (2020) reported increasing demand for citrus fruit in Spain as consumers look alternative sources for vitamin C and healthy nutrients to combat the virus. For consumer-packaged goods (CPG), the U.S. saw surging sales in this category. Surprisingly, oat milk becomes one of the items that many consumers choose to stock up. Healthrelated CPG also rise significantly. For instance, sales of medical masks in the U.S. increased 78% at the end of January 2020 (Kats 2020). The United Kingdom sales of Canned & Dry Milk skyrocketed more than 350% with Canned & Jarred Fruits also increased 297% during the second week of March 2020 (Criteo 2020).

It is understandable that these items are being stockpiled by consumers. Canned food, dry pasta, rice and raw materials like flour all have long-shelf-life and versatile in many dishes. People can rely on them to last for a long time when they might be unable to go outside for food. Health-related goods such as hand sanitizers and medical masks have all become a necessity as long as the pandemic still goes on.

3.4 Changes in consumer behavior due to COVID-19

The economic and health crisis has led to significant changes in consumer sentiment and behaviors across countries. McKinsey & Company (2020) has surveyed 45 countries since mid-March to further understand these changes. Consumers in surveyed countries show intent to shift their spending towards necessity and essentials products beside China and India. These two countries have shown plan to increase their spending in other categories than groceries and essentials. **Figure9** reported the expected spending of consumers in the next 2 weeks from 30 September 2020 compared to usual.

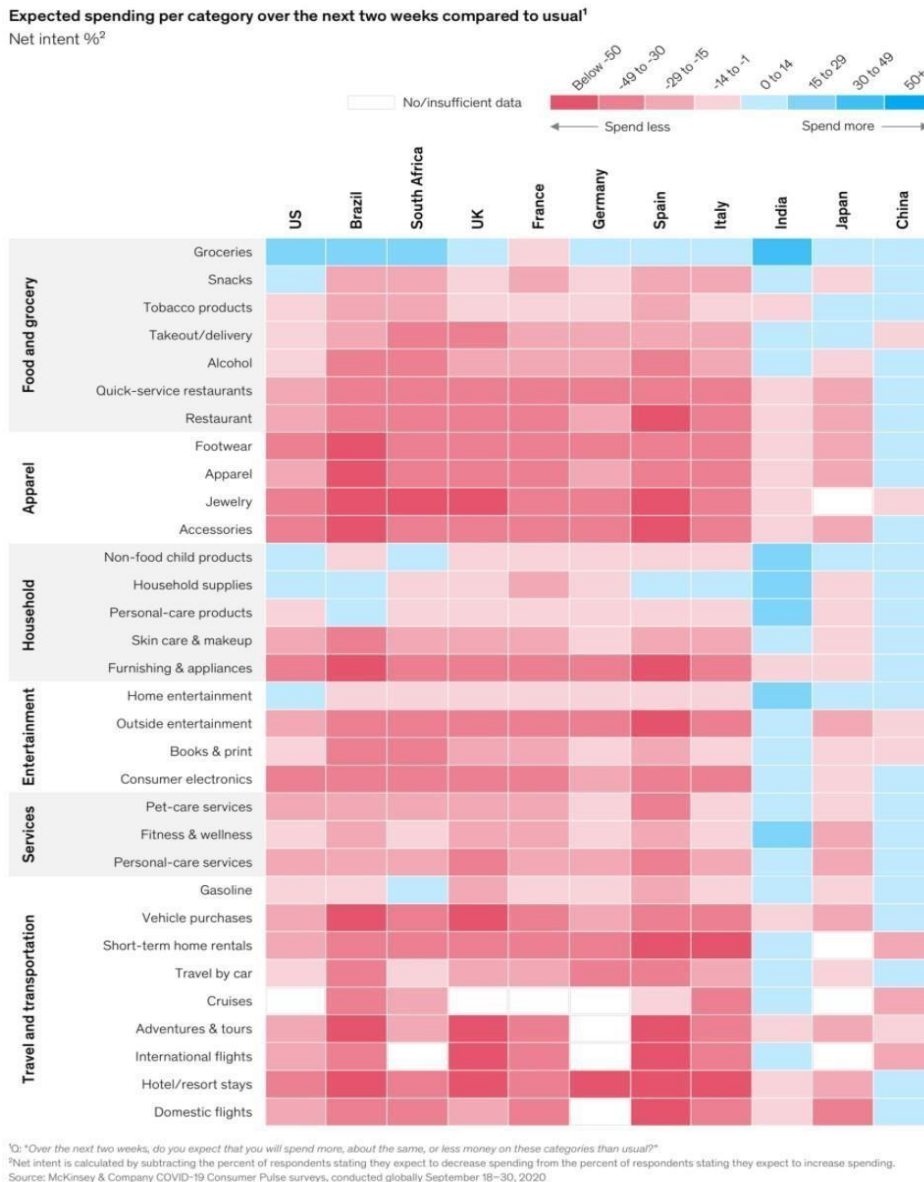


Figure 9. Expected spending per category in the next two weeks from 30 September 2020 (McKinsey & Company 2020).

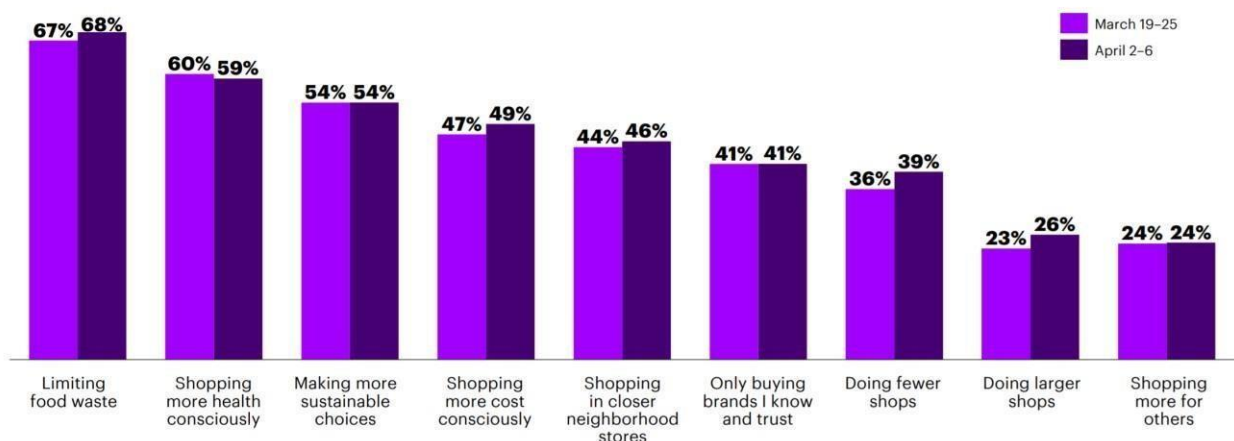
China and India are further on the way to economic recovery as their consumers show plan to spend more in various sectors, compared to other countries. Except for groceries, most countries surveyed are reluctant to spend their money on unessential, such as home furnishing or entertainment services (McKinsey & Company 2020). From **Figure 9**, we can see the drop in demand in many industries. 10 out of 11 countries reported in the chart are not planning to spend more on the apparel category.

A large part of countries also does not have plans to spend on travel and transportation, since the quarantine and border-closing order are still viable many places. This correlates with **Figure 6** reporting on the top main concerns of various industries.

Restrictions and concerns origin from COVID-19 have led to consumers adopt new purchasing habits and they are anticipated to last well into the future. A research from Accenture (2020) showed three long-term shopping habits that are now accelerated due to the virus. Firstly, consumers focus on their well-being more than ever. They are also choosing to purchase more consciously, meaning they are limiting their food waste, shopping more cost-conscious and buying sustainably. Their love for local stores also increased, either reflected by what products they are buying such as locally sourced vegetables or how they shop by supporting local stores. **Figure 10** below reported consumers' expectation on permanent changed shopping habits. The research was done firstly on March 19-25 and then on April 2-6, showing how their expectation rose after a period of time. The two top priorities are limiting food waste and shopping more health consciously, reflecting the three trends that Accenture reported. Many consumers also choose to do fewer and larger shops, cutting back on time they go outside (Accenture 2020).

Consumers expect their shopping habits to change permanently

Limiting food waste and shopping more health consciously are the top two priorities for consumers
Proportion that agree or significantly agree with statement and are likely to sustain this post-outbreak



Source: Accenture COVID-19 Consumer Research, conducted March 19-25 and April 2-6

Figure 10 Consumers' expectations on permanently changed shopping habits (Accenture 2020).

As people avoid going outside, shopping digitally has become the “new normal” for many consumers. Food and household products saw the most growth across countries, with an average of over 30% increase in online customer base (McKinsey & Company 2020). Alibaba, one of the largest ecommerce sites in China reported an increase of 220% year-over-year in orders when the virus started spreading. Instacart, an online delivery service in the U.S., were subscribed 10-20 times more than usual in states with the most reported COVID-19 cases. With the high health risks that the virus might have on consumers aged over 50, there has been a surge of new and older customers. One in three consumers aged 56 years and over shopped their last groceries for the first time online, while

the rate in the other group of consumers is one in five. The UK digital supermarket Ocado reported nearly 800,000 customers want to place a once-a-week order during March. Digital commerce is expected to last even after the outbreak as many consumers believe they would increase their online shop from 32% to 37% (Accenture 2020).

4 MARKETING STRATEGY

4.1 Definition of marketing strategy

“Marketing is the process of planning, pricing, promoting, selling, and distributing ideas, goods, or services to create exchanges that satisfy customers” (Farese & Kimbrell 2006, 32).

Marketing includes many activities in it, whose ultimate goal is to satisfy customers and gain profits for the company. However, in order to successfully do any marketing activities, a firm needs to develop a marketing strategy. A marketing strategy acts as a guide for marketers and firms to reach their goals (Farese et. al. 2006).

Authors Philip Kotler and Kevin Keller (2012) defined marketing strategy includes the mission, marketing, financial objectives and needs that the product/service could satisfy and its competitive edge compared to others.

Authors Perreault Jr., Cannon and McCarthy (2011) specified that a marketing strategy should show firms a big picture of what they will do in a market. A marketing strategy should be produced by identifying a target market and a related marketing mix. These two parts are interrelated and needed in order to have a marketing strategy (Perreault Jr. et. al. 2011, 33).

4.2 Elements of a marketing strategy

4.2.1 Mission

Mission is one of the most important elements of any firm. In the book “Principles of Marketing” by Kotler & Armstrong (2017), they emphasized the importance of a mission statement. Any organizations must serve a purpose when they exist and it should be clearly stated. In order to do this, an organization can begin by asking themselves these questions: “*What is our business? Who is the customer? What do consumers value? What should our business be?*”. These questions might sound simple, but they can be difficult for any companies to answer. However, this is not a one-time occasion and the answer might change. Companies should raise these questions continuously and carefully answer them when doing business (Kotler et. al. 2017, 64).

Within the organization, each business unit should also have their own mission statement that aligns with the company’s general mission. For example, the mission statement of a television- studiolighting-equipment company can be customer- and market-oriented, such as “to become the choice for advanced and reliable lighting technologies”. There is no mention of winning business

from smaller companies or have the lowest price. This is within the responsibility of the related department to come up with the mission statement of their own and achieve the broader business mission (Kotler et. al. 2012, 48).

4.2.2 Market analysis (SWOT, PEST)

To fully capture the opportunities and threats of a market, marketers need to conduct a market analysis as they are related to the strengths and weaknesses of the organization (NetMBA). Two most popular analyses that are commonly used to explore external and internal factors affecting an organization are SWOT and PEST.

PEST is an acronym for external factors of change, which are Political, Economic, Social and Technological. PEST analysis can be used as a powerful tool to identify changes and effects of macro environmental elements on the company's competitive position. These factors are beyond the control of a firm but need an analysis to align its business strategy to any changes. Authors Sammut-Bonnici and Galea (2015a) have an in-depth article explaining PEST analysis.

- **Political:** Legislation about trade, taxation, labour and environmental must be considered when an organization is planning its strategy. Additionally, commercial restrictions and political stability also have a great impact on a business. For example, European Union has banned tobacco advertising, led to a crisis within the Formula One Industry. Google had to stop operating in China because of censorship issues. A business can also be affected politically if there is a new legislation regarding licensing of a product or fiscal policy. Considering all these political factors above, it is crucial that firms constantly monitoring the political scene in areas that they are and will be operating in.

- **Economic:** The profitability and overall attractiveness of a market largely depends on economic factors. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is the most popular indicator to evaluate a country's economic performance. However, even though it is a useful tool, it does not consist of all the factors that may impact on a firm's activities, such as inflation or high tax rate. Economic factors affect many industries in different ways, therefore, it is vital for a firm to understand the connection between these factors to their own industry. Some industries show interdependencies on each other, for example, the entertainment industry would be greatly affected if tourism is not doing very well. There were also correlations between economic performances of different countries as well. A viral recession spread among European Union, affecting the main victims Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain.

Other countries within the Union were also affected, such as London FTSE 100 index, French CAC and German Dax all decreased significantly after the news of the fifth country, Cyprus, seeks for assistance. It might be difficult for firms to monitor a vast majority of economic factors. Firms can focus on keeping track on key economic factors that have an impact on the industry.

- **Social:** Social trends determine consumers preferences and tastes, therefore, affecting on the demand of certain products. These trends also bring changes to the workplace like work pattern and attitudes. Monitoring these social trends can help firms to adapt to needs and demands of consumers, leading to a better competitive edge in the market. For example, banks now have a wide range of offers for students to employees to billionaires. Demographic changes within a country also influence its economy. Countries that have ageing population will have additional demand for healthcare services, medicines and leisure activities. This is a difference from a young-population country where the demand for education is key, for instance. Continuously monitoring social factors will aid firms in predicting future pressures that might have an impact on the industry.

- **Technological:** Technological rapid pace of innovations can be a breakthrough for some industries and be a fall for others. Consumers now can plan and book their trips online, becoming their own travel agents through online platforms that are available to consumers now, instead of just strictly for businesses before. Retailers are intimidated because of the growth of e-commerce and online stores. Technological growth also gives us Amazon, eBay as the new intermediaries. Consumers can freely give their honest opinions on the products/services, which are valued by other consumers and influence their buying decision. Firms can use these sites to promote new products and as another sales channel as well. For businesses, technology advancement can help them achieve a competitive advantage, such as cheaper production, better product quality and improved access to customers. Firms must stay in touch with the latest technology developments and how they affect the current industry in order to thrive. (Sammut-Bonnici & Galea 2015a, 1-6).

SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. A SWOT analysis helps you evaluate these four aspects of your business and an organization can use it to their best advantage (MindTools). An internal analysis of the firm's strengths and weaknesses includes resources, capabilities, core competencies and other competitive advantages within the organization. An external analysis of the market's opportunities and threats identifies competitors' resources, the general environment and surrounding environment of the industry (Sammut-Bonnici & Galea 2015b, 1). A

SWOT analysis's target is to cooperate the firm's strengths and market opportunities, at the same time eradicate the weaknesses and reduce the threats (Kotler & Armstrong 2017, 80).

- **Strengths:** To identify organizational strength, the internal analysis must show the characteristics and situations that the organization has a clear advantage and appear to be more efficient than its competitors. There are five criteria to determine if one organization is stronger, weaker or equal to another: market situation, financial structure, product and technical capacity, potential for research and development, human capacity and management effectiveness (these must be compared in a relative method) (Gürel 2017, 997). However, an aspect is only defined as an organizational strength if it brings clear advantage to the firm. For example, if all of the competitors have a high-quality production process, then high-quality products are not the company's strengths anymore but rather a necessity to stay in the industry (MindTools).

- **Weaknesses:** An organization weakness can be defined by aspects or activities that its performance is less effective and efficient compared to its competitors. These weaknesses can affect negatively to how an organization performs and weaken it in the industry. A source of weakness can come from facilities, financing, management capabilities, marketing strategy or brand image. It is critical for an organization to realize its weaknesses as much as its strengths. Then, they can solve these problems that may cause hardships in the future (Gürel 2017, 997).

- **Opportunities:** Gürel (2017) defines environmental opportunities are "the convenient time or situation that the environment presents to the organization to achieve its goals". These opportunities usually appear from external situations and they require organizations to keep an eye on. They can come from the developments within the industry or new innovations from the technology used in the firm. The ability to recognize and utilize these opportunities to the company's advantage can make a great impact of its competitiveness and positioning in the market (MindTools).

- **Threats:** A situation or condition that causes difficulties or makes it impossible to reach the organization's target is seen as a threat. Changes in the distant or immediate environment of the company can lead to threats that would jeopardize the company's existence or lose its competitive edge compared to the competitors (Gürel 2017, 998). It is advised that companies

be aware of these threats and have a strategic plan against it before becoming the victim. They can be problems from the supply chain, changes in market requirements, or bad debt that can cause vulnerability even to the smallest changes in the industry. Before adapting the organization's strategy to face a certain challenge, managers should consider what the

competitors are doing and raise the question of whether this would improve the organization's positioning in the market (MindTools).

4.2.3 Target market

Companies are advised to segment the mass market into group of consumers who share the same demands and needs. Then, companies need to identify which customer groups they can serve the most effectively. A good knowledge of consumer behavior with careful strategic thinking contribute to the decision of choosing the right target market. Being able to identify and satisfy the right target market often leads to marketing success (Kotler et. al. 2012, 213).

There are a variety of methods to segment a market due to buyers in each market differ in terms of their wants, finance, geographical locations, buying behaviors and many more. **Figure 11** below demonstrates factors that can be used to divide consumer market. The four major categories are Geographic, Demographic, Psychographic and Behavioral.

Segmentation Variable	Examples
Geographic	Nations, regions, states, counties, cities, neighborhoods, population density (urban, suburban, rural), climate
Demographic	Age, life-cycle stage, gender, income, occupation, education, religion, ethnicity, generation
Psychographic	Lifestyle, personality
Behavioral	Occasions, benefits, user status, usage rate, loyalty status

Figure 11. Example of segmentation variables for consumer markets (Kotler et. al. 2017, 213).

It is important that marketing managers are aware of the effectiveness of the segmentation. For example, consumers who buy table salt can be segmented into blonde and brunette, however, this factor does not affect the purchase of table salt at all. The requirements to have effective segmentation are measurable, accessible, substantial, differentiable and actionable (Kotler et. al. 2017, 221).

After segmenting the market, firms now have to evaluate and select one or many segments that they can serve best. There are three factors that firms can base on to evaluate, which are the size and growth of the segments, their structural attractiveness and company's objectives and resources. Firstly, firms must choose segment(s) that have the right size and growth for the company. Sometimes, the fastest growing and largest segments are not always the right choice for some companies, especially smaller ones. It is more beneficial for them in the future to enter a segment with less competitors and less attractive. Secondly, structural factors of a segment also need to be examined by the firms. A segment with many large and aggressive competitors or the industry is welcoming to new entrants can determine if they are desirable or not. Other factors such as substitute products, powerful buyers or

powerful suppliers can also affect the attractiveness of a segment. Finally, the company's objectives and resources are the final factor to decide if a market segment is the right choice. Even attractive segments can be disregarded if they are not aligning with the company's long-run objectives. It is advised that companies should only enter a segment if they can bring superior values to their customers and gain a competitive edge in the industry (Kotler et. al. 2017, 221-222).

4.2.4 Marketing mix

After selecting the suitable market segment(s), firms can customize marketing strategies to serve consumers effectively. This is when the marketing mix is introduced. According to Kotler and Armstrong, the definition of marketing mix is "the set of tactical marketing tools – product, price, place, and promotion – that the firm blends to produce the response it wants in the target market". It is also known as the "four Ps", which stands for the four groups of variables (Kotler et. al. 2017, 77).

Figure 12 demonstrates the relationship between the target market and the marketing mix. The customer is not a part of the strategy, but rather the center of all marketing efforts (Perreault Jr. et. al. 2011, 36). This part discusses the four elements of the marketing mix.



Figure 12. The four Ps of the marketing mix (Perreault Jr. et. al. 2011, 36).

- **Product:** It is simply defined as the combination of goods and services that the company provides to the customers (Kotler et. al. 2017, 77). This element is concerned with developing the "right" product for the target market and it can include physical good, service, benefits, quality level, packaging, branding and so on (Perreault Jr. et. al. 2011, 36).
- **Place:** After getting the "right" product, it is the company's job to get this product to reach customers at where and when it is wanted. Firms can sell the product directly to the endcustomers or it can go through a channel of distribution, which is any series of intermediaries that help the flow of products from the producer to the end-user. Other factors

that can affect this element are market exposure, logistics issues such as transporting, storing and handling, or managing different channels (Perreault Jr. et. al. 2011, 36).

- **Promotion:** This involves any activities that telling the target market and others about the product to convince them purchasing it. Promotion activities can be used to attract new customers or retain the existing ones. Personal selling, mass selling and sales promotions are all part of promotion and marketing managers should know how to blend these communication methods (Perrault Jr. et. al. 2011, 37-38).

- **Price:** Price is the final factor in the marketing mix. If customers are not willing to pay the price, all of the marketing efforts are now wasted. Managers should decide the price based on the competition in the target market and the marketing mix's cost. They also need to be aware of current industry practices, such as markups and discounts on products (Perrault Jr. et. al. 2011, 38).

The marketing mix plays a great part in a marketing program. It should be integrated fully and help the company achieve its goal by attracting customers and delivering value. Each component of the four Ps is equally important and they contribute to establish the desired positioning for the brand. Even though there have been other marketing mixes, such as four As (Acceptability, Affordability, Accessibility, Awareness) or the new four Ps (Process, Platforms, People, Performance), the importance is which framework should be helpful to design the integrated marketing strategy (Perrault Jr. et. al. 2011, 38; Kotler et. al. 2017, 78-79).

4.3 Changes in the marketing strategy during COVID-19

It is evident that the pandemic has affected greatly to marketing activities in multiple ways. Consumer behavior pre- and post-pandemic differs significantly, leading to the alter of core marketing concepts, the context of marketing and marketing strategies (He & Harris 2020). For the purpose of this study, the discussion focuses solely on changes in marketing strategy affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The unpredictable spreading speed of the coronavirus forces many organizations to be flexible by adopting agility in marketing strategy. Companies' futures depend on how they learn and adapt to today's crisis. Continuously adjusting and adapting to new and different environments has become essential for marketers during these times. Not only do they have to satisfy rising customer's new demands, but they are also under pressure to follow restrictions and/or guidance from the government (Boudet, Gordon, Gregg, Perrey & Robinson 2020; Pantano, Pizzi, Scarpi & Dennis 2020).

Firstly, with the profound shift from offline stores to e-commerce, marketers have to consider reallocate their marketing investments and adjust the marketing mix to meet the new consumer demand. Kathy Bachmann, General Manager of Analytic Partners Inc. in Americas, expected to see businesses move their budget from long-term campaigns to new marketing tactics that can drive online sales. During this difficult time, marketers need to reevaluate and optimize the limited budget that they have, since consumers are spending less than before. This includes focusing marketing efforts to the most relevant product in this situation and reducing resources from products that have low demand. Marketers are required to track performance and decisively move the budget when needed (Talbot 2020; Boudet et. al. 2020). The online gift card marketplace Raise (U.S.) adopted this new marketing mindset well. They have transited their typical popular products from travel gift cards to day-to-day essentials such as home goods, groceries, home office equipment. Raise continues to monitor the cycles of consumers' needs at home and adapts their marketing strategy accordingly (Carr2020).

Consumers have always been the core for marketing philosophy and ideology. The mission for any marketers has been to look for the needs and demands of consumers and satisfy them at much as possible (He et. al. 2020). Especially, in a sensitive time like this when there is no confirmative outcome of the pandemic, consumers are more vulnerable and sensitive than ever. Companies that take advantage of the situation to exploit commercially will not have a good outcome. Showing empathy, connecting with consumers and staying relevant to them are keys to their hearts during these times. Advertisement for a getaway vacation or messages that seem too optimistic may come across as tone deaf to consumers. Marketers should explore the brands' elements that are relevant to consumers in this situation. For example, Lululemon, a sport clothing brand, conveyed the message "The community carries on" and made yoga videos that their consumers can join in at home. A large part of the population is in financial hardships at the moment. Many banks realized that and waived their overdraft fees, in order to help their consumers (Balis 2020; Boudet et. al. 2020).

The ways that brands act and response to this crisis will remain in consumers' minds, even after the pandemic is gone. Therefore, an organization that takes initiative and provides to the communities with generosity would have a good image to the consumers. Any acts of good at the moment would help relieve the anxiety and promote positivity, hence, enhance the brand image. However, consumers will recognize if firms are being authentic and the true purpose of the brand when implementing these acts. It is crucial that companies are contributing to the society from their hearts and not solely for the benefit. The cycling equipment brand EKOI gave back to their community by donating masks, glasses

and 5% of their sales to hospitals. Ekoï also offered up to 10000 masks to consumers when they ordered from their website (Balis 2020; Carr 2020).

Even though working in an agile way is encouraged for organizations now, it is still crucial to have a plan for the future after the pandemic ends. Firms will have to reflect on their original vision and mission due to the changed market dynamic and many assumptions can no longer apply to the postpandemic world. It is predicted that many organizations will now adopt a long-term survival strategy, accompanying with newly found agility and valuable social responsibility. The marketing media mixes also require reassessment since many marketing models are based on previous data (Boudet et. al. 2020; He et. al. 2020). Another tactic to adapt to the “next normal” world is taking advantage of advanced analytics. Continuously tracking consumer behavior and building scenarios will help marketers stay in touch with the sentiment and buying pattern of their consumers. When leveraging advanced analytics, organizations can consider between short- and long-term plans to better satisfy their consumers’ needs and demands (Talbot 2020; Balis 2020).

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research approach

There are two main research methods, which are Quantitative Research and Qualitative Research. A mixed method, which is a combination of both methods, is also sometimes in use. The choice of data collecting method is based on what kind of information the researcher is looking for in his/her study. Sometimes, a quantitative research is recommended when the field is well studied previously and in need of more precise numerical data. Furthermore, the data collection method also depends on the sample the researcher is collecting from, whether they are easy to contact, available and willing to answer the author's questions (Felix & Smith 2019, 93).

Authors Felix and Smith (2019) defined qualitative research is "providing the answer to the research question through the recorded use of narratives, experiences, discourse, content analysis or the spoken word". Even though there are arguments concerning the objectivity of this collection method, it is still one of the main research methodologies. Researchers can gather qualitative data from personal interviews, group interviews or observation of the sample. Data is collected until researchers reach data saturation, which means there is no new information from the interviewees (Felix et. al. 2019, 94).

The study of measurement of quantity or amount is called quantitative research. This method is used for subjects that can be translated into numerical data. Quantitative research is more preferred by many researchers as it is considered to be more objective. However, the quality of data collected plays a great role in this kind of empirical study. If the data collected is of poor quality, then the results are not useful to the study. Researchers usually gather quantitative data by using a structured questionnaire or another form of systematic observation. The validity of data is based on the sample size. Typically, a social science study can require 500 to 1000 participants or even more (Felix et. al. 2019, 95; Kothari 2004, 3).

In this paper, the qualitative methodology is chosen to execute the empirical study of this research. The author of this research study believed that the qualitative methodology could gather the data needed to answer the thesis questions. One of the main advantages of this method is it can explore the connection of the processes and the outcomes, reaching the parts that other quantitative methods can not. The thesis questions concern marketing strategies and consumer behavior under the effects of COVID-19, hence, it is best to conduct qualitative research to have richer results on the topic. The research questions are not based on assumptions of one reality, but they are looking at the changes of marketing strategies that have been made due to the pandemic and the dynamic between consumers

and the market. Qualitative research is also valuable because it can trace back the processes that leading to the changes. Collecting the participants' different explanations and experiences through this method can contribute to the understanding of the ways they response to a certain situation (Moriarty 2011, 3).

5.2 Research design

Personal interviews with a semi-structured questionnaire with the participants are conducted to gather qualitative data. Due to the COVID-19 situation and geographical distance, the interviews were executed online through Zoom, a video call platform. The questionnaire focuses on the participants' opinions and predictions on consumer behavior and marketing strategies pre-, during- and postpandemic. Since the effects of the pandemic vary on different markets, interviewees that work in a variety of backgrounds could provide information from their own industry and therefore, the research study can compare the differences and similarities of said backgrounds.

The semi-structured questionnaire allows the author to ask the participant a set of structured questions that provide the needed information for the research study, while still have the opportunity to explore more by asking follow-up questions (Adams 2015, 493). Telephone interviews can be more comfortable for the interviewees. Besides the obvious COVID-19 situation, telephone interviews allow the participants to choose the time and place where they feel most comfortable and relaxed while still maintain a distance from the interviewer. The interviewer also made sure to let the participants aware that they are listened, by adding affirmative responses such as “mmm” or “yeah” (Moriarty 2011, 9).

5.3 Data collection

The questionnaire was first made in English, as it is the main language of this research. However, during the data collecting phase, there were two participants who required to be interviewed in Vietnamese because of the language barrier. The author then translated the interview questionnaire into Vietnamese while still preserving the original meaning and context. The interviews were audiorecorded by Zoom, then transcribed and translated if needed by the author. The answers then were employed for the data analysis of the thesis.

The author successfully interviewed four participants, who have work experience in marketing from four different industries. The original implementation plan was to interview at least 5 experts in marketing. However, the empirical study has met difficulties due to concerns about the confidentiality of the research from the participants. The participants were approached by the author through email

first by sending a cover letter explaining the interview process, accompanying with the questionnaire in order to let participants understand what kind of questions they have to answer. After they agree to participate in the interviews, the interviewer and the interviewee choose a suitable time for the virtual interview.

6 DATA ANALYSIS

The empirical study was introduced to four participants, who have work experience in the marketing field. The paragraph below summarizes information about four interviewees with their job position, industry and region. All identities and information leading to the identities of the interviewees have been removed to retain complete anonymity. The names of the participants and their companies will be changed into pseudonyms.

The first interviewee is Ms. A, who has been working in the marketing field for several years. She is currently the Marketing Manager for a Customer Loyalty Program, based in the Europe region. Throughout her years working as a marketer, Ms. A was able to provide important information regarding the marketing scenes in her industry for the research study. The second interviewee is Ms. B, who is a Digital Marketing Coordinator at the moment. She works mainly with the digital marketing campaigns for her company, who provides delivery services within Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam. The third participant, Mr. C, is working as a Business Development Trainee at a Spiritual Education program in Vietnam. Mr. C develops classes that focus on learning and exercising moral behaviors, enhancing life relationships and life purpose for people of all age. His company is one of the few successful Spiritual Education programs in Vietnam and has gained popularity for the last couple of years. Ms. D, the last interviewee, has years of working as a marketer. She was a successful Campaign Leader at an in-house marketing agency in Ho Chi Minh city. Her team worked primarily in the automotive industry and was able to help her clients have a breakthrough last year with innovative marketing campaigns. She recently becomes the newest Marketing Specialist at a luxury sports equipment company. With her experience working at both an agency and a client company, Ms. D added many useful insights about the general marketing industry in Vietnam.

The data analysis is divided in three parts, correlating to the three research questions. Each part starts with the according research question, follows by the summaries of the respondents' answers regarding the topic and ends with the analysis.

6.1 Customer behavior's changes due to COVID-19

The study starts by exploring the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on customer behavior. All four participants agreed that one of the largest changes is people are staying at home and not going outside, leading to the significant increase in social media usage. Ms. B stated that her company has to immediately add more online customer service chat boxes on their platform since the numbers of customers using this service escalating very fast. Their social media posts also reached a much larger audience. Ms. B emphasized that people were sharing more things online, they were continuously

giving feedback about their received services and it was such a great increase compared to the same period last year. With the rise of social media usage, both Ms. B and Ms. D felt the pressure to be responsive to their customers, either to good or bad feedbacks. It is just not about how they response, but also how fast they are responding is being carefully monitored by the consumers. With the extensive amount of time people are staying at home and using social media, they have become smarter and more aware of the information they see online. This means that consumers can now differentiate companies that are being authentic or not. They are not afraid to use their voice against brands who they deem to be unauthentic.

People are using social media more, which in turn leads to they are online shopping more. With the restrictions in many countries, people have difficulties going outside and they resolved in online shops. Ms. A stated that not only the consumers change the way they shop, but what they shop also change. Her company saw customers buying products that make them feel more comfortable at home. Her customers changed from fashionable clothing and accessories to pajamas and home decoration items. The online shops partners are now contributing to 80% of her company's revenue, which used to be only 40% before the pandemic.

6.2 Adaptation of marketing strategies to the current situation

The second research question investigates the adaptation of marketing strategies when the pandemic happened. The empirical study starts this investigation by asking the respondents about their previous marketing plans pre-COVID-19. To this question, each participant has customized their marketing tactics to their own industry. For example, Ms. A was working mainly with data-driven marketing in order to provide personalized offers to her customers. Ms. B's team was focusing on content and email marketing. Their initial plan for 2020 was to employ Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and produce viral videos/Marketing Music Videos to boost their brand awareness. Mr. C who works in the Spiritual Education program found the referral system or word-of-mouth marketing is the best way to attract customers. The automotive industry where Ms. D worked in was quite traditional. They mostly organized trade shows or had paid PR posts to promote their products. When coronavirus broke out, they were all working under the pressure of modifying their long-term plans to adapt to the current situation over night. Ms. A, Ms. B and Ms. D all emphasized the importance of the flexibility and agility of marketing strategies during these times. They have found their team to work in much shorter-term strategies and constantly tailor their marketing mixes in order to stay in the competition.

Ms. A stated the importance of deciding and acting fast, while simultaneously promoting and implementing ideas fast. Ms. D commented that they are still working in an agile way even until now,

after more than one year of the pandemic. She believed that the reason behind this is the uncertain situation that every industry is still facing. The pandemic has come and gone almost every quarter in Vietnam, therefore, her team found it is best to continuously planning short-term campaigns rather than one long-term strategy that might get cancelled at the last minute.

With the profound increase of social media usage and online shopping, the respondents agreed that they had to reallocate their marketing investments and efforts into more relevant products and platforms. In the case of Ms. A, her team had to put their event and travel partners on hold and turned to promote their online shop partners. She believed it was a smart decision to switch all marketing efforts to the digital shops. Furthermore, with the insight that customers are looking for products that made them feel comfortable at home, her team also chose to promote furniture shops and home clothing brands. Other respondents added to this idea that most of their marketing happens virtually, instead of being in real life. Ms. B's company resolved in digital engagement events, such as minigames (online giveaways that require users to engage in certain activities in order to win prizes), in order to stay connected with their customers. Ms. D worked with an automotive client who had never put their brand online before. Her team had successfully convinced them to move their marketing activities to the digital world when the coronavirus started. They have to become increasingly active on social media, employing KOLs who posted videos talking/reviewing about their cars while controlling the online community narrative by using seeding comments on Facebook.

Ms. D also noticed that a lot of FCMG brands "attacked" popular e-commerce sites. She believed this is the leading marketing trend at the moment in Vietnam as brands are trying to utilize these platformsto boost their sales.

Another prominent tactic that the respondents' companies use is showing empathy and staying relevant to their customers. The theoretical part of this study has highlighted how consumers will remember brands that show acts of good and share their hardships. A campaign promoting "Stay at home. Stay healthy" mentality was created by Ms. A's company. They started the according social media hashtags and encouraged their customers to follow the government's regulations. On the other hand, Ms. B's company chose to show acts of good. They produced a charity campaign where a part of a customer's order will be donated towards good cause. Her organization also further builds their marketing campaigns around giving back to the community.

The only interviewee who does not develop a new marketing strategy plan during the pandemic was Mr. C. He explained the reason behind this was his company's education program focus on the mental wellbeing of the class participants. His CEO's belief is to provide true value to their customers and customers will remember his program by the value they receive, rather than the marketing tactics that

seem to be too artificial to convey his purpose. Instead of developing digital campaigns that do not align with the company's value, Mr. C advised that rather follow a social media trend, it is more beneficial for companies to understand what value they are giving to their customers and how they can continue to provide that value.

In conclusion, most of the participants have developed their marketing strategies to be more proactive in the virtual world. This is a response of organizations to the changed consumer behavior during the pandemic. Furthermore, the opinions of the respondents also confirmed the theoretical advice of prioritizing more relevant products to consumers. The agility mentality has been adopted well throughout the participants' answers. Most of them believed the flexibility is the most important elements when working on marketing strategies during this difficult situation. Finally, the responses of these industry insiders provide insights on how brands stay relevant and connected to their customers. It is crucial that they are sending the message of empathy and positiveness on their platforms. This will result in a better brand image and customer loyalty when consumers can see their efforts in acts of good. Even though one participant's marketing strategy is in contrary to the rest, the majority of responses still aligned with each other.

6.3 The future for marketing plans post-pandemic

As of the time when the research study is being written, there has been vaccines for the coronavirus. Many countries have started giving the vaccination to their people while many does not have the access yet. However, the pandemic is still considered a danger to human's lives and people have not yet returned to the life before the pandemic (Skegg, Gluckman, Boulton, Hackmann, Karim, Piot & Woopen 2021).

The final research question concerns the future for marketing plans after the pandemic. The empirical study investigates this matter by asking the participants about their future marketing plans and predictions on marketing trends in upcoming year. Most of the participants believed that the pandemic would continue at least until the end of the year. However, they are positive that there would be new marketing trends that are coming soon. Firstly, consumers are becoming more aware about their health. This statement is agreed by the majority of the interviewees. The effects of COVID-19 have led consumers to be more concern about security and sustainability in their life. Both Ms. A and Ms. D stated that these would be the newest topics that marketers can explore in the near future. Ms. D elaborated on this idea by stating after a year of only focusing on the pandemic, the trend of recycled products, environmental issues along with people wellness are coming back at the end of 2021 or early 2022. Secondly, the rise of social media usage and online shopping will not stop anytime soon.

People are more comfortable using the Internet and they would continue this habit even when life resumes normal. Furthermore, Gen Z users (people born from late 1990s to early 2000s) has become prominent trendsetters online. Ms. B and Ms. D believed that organizations would adapt their marketing strategies to the new social media habits and users. Key Opinion Leaders and celebrity endorsements are predicted to be the next marketing trend by Ms. B and Ms. D as well. They both noticed that with the rise of media consumption online, this type of endorsement would play a great role in marketing strategies for brands in the future. Finally, Ms. D has the outlook that organizations are being more active in CSR-related activities. The reason for this can be companies trying to satisfy the consumers' expectations they would continue their acts of good even after the pandemic is over.

7 CONCLUSION

As the objective of this research study is to examine how the pandemic impacts on marketing strategies, this chapter centralizes the main findings of the study by answering the research questions.

7.1 How does the pandemic impact on customer behavior?

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected every aspect of people's lives. It has created a new reality which forces consumers to adapt and learn to survive during this difficult time. The quarantine orders in many countries have led to people staying at home in an extensive amount of time, causing organizations to close their business and people to lose their jobs. This has greatly affected the buying behavior of consumers. Since they are not going outside as much, online shopping has become their resolution. Consumers have adopted the new purchase habits of online shopping for both essential and unessential products. This new buying behavior is expected to continue even after the pandemic. Even though online shopping and e-commerce are not new in the digital world, the convenience of online shopping is now further integrated in consumers' life. What consumers are purchasing online also change continuously. At the beginning of the pandemic, consumers focused on buying necessities that have a long shelf life, such as dry ingredients, canned food or bottled water. However, countries on the path of economic recovery are seeing consumers slowly have plans spending on unnecessary categories, such as travel or apparel items. Furthermore, social media is even more deeply integrated in people's lives. As they are being restricted on movements, they find social media as their ways to communicate and stay connected with the world. The more time people spend on social media, the more they understand the power they have on these platforms. They are using it to gain access to the latest information, to share information online and to voice their opinions. A health crisis such as the outbreak of a novelty coronavirus has led people to be more conscious about their own health and others around them. It has accelerated the long-term trend of health-related products. They are taking steps towards improving the quality of their own life. This includes purchasing more health-conscious products, limiting food waste and making sustainable choices. This newly adopted consumer behavior is believed to last permanently.

Overall, consumers have developed new life habits under the effects of COVID-19. These include their buying

behavior, social interaction, social media usage and many more. These changes have been made due to the health concerns related to the virus as well as regulations from the government. Consumers expected these changes would last further in the future. Even when the pandemic comes to an end, many people might have a hard time adjusting to their normal life.

7.2 How do marketers adapt their marketing strategy in current situation?

Not only this is a health crisis, but the pandemic has also negatively affected on the world's economy. Consumers have changed their buying behavior and it is predicted to last permanently. This has led to organizations have to reevaluate their marketing strategies and find the most effective ways to retain their customers.

Firstly, the significant shift from offline stores to online stores resulted in many brands developing ecommerce sites and digital marketing campaigns. Both the theoretical findings and empirical research have highlighted the importance of adapting digitally to the rising needs and demands of consumers. Organizations need to take initiative to be more proactive on virtual platforms, striving to provide the same or even better values for their customers online. In other words, they must provide the equivalent services and products online as offline pre-pandemic. Furthermore, firms must constantly learn about the new consumer behavior that are changing every day. Previous knowledge of how your customers act may not be true anymore. The pandemic has led consumers change the way they shop and what they shop simultaneously. The key to marketing success during these times has been confirmed by industry insiders that companies must learn about these changes and tailor their marketing mixes accordingly. Reallocating marketing efforts and investments to more relevant products and platforms is said to help companies attract new customers and retain existing ones. Products that are not relevant to the current situation, such as luxury items or travel-related services, can be reduced in resources in order to utilize the limited budget that companies are having now.

Not only what companies change about their marketing strategies, but how fast they are changing it also matters to consumers. The agile method of working has been proved to be effective in dealing with the fast-paced changing market at the moment. Companies have to consider both the demands from consumers and regulations from government when planning a marketing strategy. Therefore, a long-term strategy seems to be less effective when the pandemic danger is still at hand and the market can change drastically over night. Industry insiders believed that adopting agility has been one of the most effective ways for them in dealing with this situation. The ability to be flexible is critical in marketing nowadays, as companies should be able to customize their strategies accordingly to new restrictions and/or consumers demands and needs. Organizations must constantly monitor the market in order to make suitable changes in time.

Finally, the marketing tactic that has been widely used is showing empathy to consumers and showing acts of good. Consumers are still feeling sensitive and vulnerable in this unpredictable situation. How a brand response to

this specific situation will be remembered by consumers a long time even after

the pandemic. Brands are suggested to donate and give back to the community. This can be donating masks and other medical equipment for hospitals, donating food for people in need or support the local communities. However, it is important that brands should do these acts with generosity and authenticity, rather than just for commercial benefits. Consumers can recognize the signs and they will value brands that they deem to be authentic. Being empathic and showing the unity against the coronavirus can help elevate brands' position in consumers' mind. Companies are encouraged to utilize their social media platforms to communicate and stay in touch with their customers. Over optimistic messages or advertisements about products that customers have difficulties get access to at the moment can be seen as tone-deaf. Brands should tap into their own elements that are relevant to customers and employ them as the way to customers' hearts. If a brand shows the ability to handle this situation well, their brand image and customer loyalty could be significantly improved.

In conclusion, in order to adapt to the "new normal", marketers have modified how they work on marketing strategies significantly. Three main improvements were made clear in both the empirical research and theoretical findings. These consist of redirecting their marketing efforts in products and platforms that are more relevant to the current situation, adopting agility in working and displaying empathy and acts of goods towards consumers. Marketing centralizes around customers and when customers are much more unpredictable and vulnerable, organizations must continuously monitor and make necessary change to stay in the competition.

7.3 What is the future for marketing plans for post-pandemic?

Even though the vaccines for this virus have been invented, experts still expressed their concerns about the outcome of the pandemic. People are still encouraged to continue prevention acts against the virus, such as wearing mask, hand sanitizing and social distancing, until the world has achieved high population coverage on vaccines. Or else, there would be a catastrophic outcome. It is still uncertain about how the pandemic might continue (Skegg et. al. 2021).

Many marketing insiders also stated that the current marketing scene is likely to continue until the end of this year. They suggest marketers to look out for the new trends in consumer behavior, such as health-conscious consumption, sustainability or life security. These can become the next topics that marketers can explore and tailor their marketing mixes accordingly. Social media and online shopping are predicted to continue to increase in user coverage. This means that more people will start using these platforms, either to communicate with each other or to purchase items. Therefore, companies should remain active in the digital world and advance their methods in reaching and providing values to customers. Gen Z has slowly become a prominent part of Internet users and they

can determine the next buying behavior trend. Marketers need to maintain relevancy within this community and build marketing campaigns centralized them. Furthermore, KOLs or celebrity endorsement can be employed to a company's advantage as media consumption reaches peak. In the future, it is likely that many brands will focus their marketing efforts to these kinds of endorsements in order to reach their target audience. Finally, consumers may have a high expectation on brands to maintain their acts of good. This might result in brands cooperating more CSR activities in their marketing campaigns.

To answer the final research question, marketing strategies will continue to change to adapt to the market. One of the biggest trends that many brands might focus on in the future is products that promote the well-being of human and environments. After more than a year of fighting against a deadly virus, it is predictable that consumers are looking ways to enhance their life quality of themselves and others. Digital marketing investments are likely to extend and reach new heights to correlate the rising Internet usage of consumers. Researching insights on Gen Z and spending on KOLs are also noticeable trends to industry insiders. Corporate Social Responsibility is also highly valued by consumers, leading it to be integrated in future marketing strategies. As the current outcome is not definite yet, marketers have to stay alert to new trends as well as retaining the agile working methods to achieve marketing success.

8 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

“Validity in research is concerned with the accuracy and truthfulness of scientific findings” (Brink 1993). A research study is considered valid if it demonstrates clearly what exists and a valid methodology to reinforce what it should measure. Reliability deals with the consistency, stability and repeatability of the data collected and the author’s ability to accurately collect and record these data. There are four main criteria to evaluate the validity of a study: credibility, authenticity, criticality and integrity. On the other hand, reliability of a qualitative research is based on the trustworthiness of the study. Validity and reliability measurements are to ensure the truthfulness of the researcher on a social phenomenon and eliminate unnecessary bias (Brink 1993; Golafshani 2003; University of Miami).

The thesis presents multiple theoretical findings from reliable academic sources within recent years. Although there were exceptions in a number of sources that date back further, these theories are essential and still widely adopted by industry experts. These findings have decreased the possibility of a bias, one-theory research. The primary data collection method was used by executing interviews with experts in the marketing industry. The data collection process was conducted in a consistent method with all four interviewees. However, there were external factors that influence the quality of the data collected, for example, the Internet connection disruption led to missing answers or the confidentiality agreement of the participant and their companies causing the participants unable to recap their marketing strategies in specific details. However, the interviewees’ answers remained insightful as they were able to report hidden numbers and trends that were not available publicly. The background of the interviewees also contributed to the validity and reliability of this paper. All respondents have worked in the industry many years, with hands-on experience in implementing marketing strategies. Therefore, they are capable to provide information regarding the thesis topic professionally. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents showed resemblance in their opinions. Therefore, a potential future research with similar discussion can acquire corresponding results.

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QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Introduction about yourself. (Name, current work position, experience in marketing field, etc.)
2. Before the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, what were the predicted marketing trends that you had known of?
3. What was the marketing strategy of your company for 2020 pre-pandemic? Did it follow any trends that you mentioned above?
4. After the pandemic started, how did your company's marketing strategy change? What was the most significant change in your opinion?
5. How did your customer's behavior change after the pandemic? What effects did it have on your marketing strategy?
6. In your opinion, did your organization's new marketing strategy succeed? If yes, what were the reasons? If not, how can it be improved?
7. What are some elements that you think are vital to marketing strategies during the pandemic? Are they any different prior to the pandemic?
8. The change in consumer behavior is predicted to have a permanent effect. How do you think it is going to impact your future marketing strategy?
9. What are your predictions for marketing trends in the upcoming year?