THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FASHION CONSUMER BUYING PERCEPTION

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Abstract

The Pandemic in the form of COVID-19 has created a situation in social , economical and business sectors which was never thought of and never experienced. The COVID-19 crisis which started in India in the second week of March 2020 affected all the citizen in multiple fronts be it physical, emotional, social, spiritual, financial. The Indian retail business has also been hit hard by the pandemic. In this period of lockdown and ease of lockdown the discussion on how customers will behave post COVID-19 in terms of their fashion buying perception where broadly classified in two categories .There are customers who believe that post lockdown or post easing of lockdown consumers will be engaged in sensible buying, more inclined towards need based buying i.e. fulfilling their basic essentials rather than aspiration buying. While the other category of customers is those who believe customers will be back to normal i.e. endless and mindless buying. But this outcome was on the basis of discussion, brainstorming with a select group of individuals as customers, business practitioners and it presents only a qualitative outline of the impact of the current Pandemic on customers and retail business. In the absence of quantitative data the outcomes cannot be validated. Thus an in-depth study was conducted to determine how the fashion market dynamics has changed in COVID 19 situation (during lockdown, easing of lockdown and post lockdown) as compared to pre Covid-19 situation and to understand Impact of Covid-19 on the buying behavior of Indians as customers. The study was conducted in India across major retail growth centers and primary data was collected from 5500 fashion customers using questionnaire method of data collection. The study clearly brought out that post COVID-19 customers buying perception for fashion product changed in terms of their inclination towards online shopping; value for money home grown brands and basic fashion product categories.

Introduction

The pandemic in the form of COVID-19 brought challenges for the fashion Industry business globally. The lockdown and maintaining of COVID -19 protocols resulted in changes in consumers' daily lives and consumption pattern. Due to this a shift in types of commodities bought by customers were observed wherein more inclination towards essential product and less towards non essential and discretionary purchases were observed (Arora , 2020; Knowles et al., 2020). Buying of clothes became discretionary purchase, resulting in huge loss to the fashion industry.

Census Bureau data released in mid-April 2020 indicated that clothing sales dropped by 50.5% (Callahan, 2020). According to McKinsey , 2020 due to the pandemic the fashion industry's economic profit dropped by 93% in 2020.

Researchers have also pointed out at opportunities brought by the pandemic for brands as it has produced rapid, sustained shifts in environments, markets, and consumers' needs and wants (Knowles et al., 2020).

Under a normal circumstances it is difficult to gain attention of consumers' and influence their buying pattern and preferences but when disruptions occur in their life they explore change in consumption patterns , needs , wants and buying behaviour and are more prone to new interventions by brands (Andreasen, 1984; Moschis, 2007).

The pandemic gave an opportunity to study consumer changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns with reference to fashion business wherein they might have practiced improvisations, and developed new spending patterns and consumption habits in clothing consumption while going through the extended lockdown and slow reopening (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020; Sheth, 2020).

During restrictions on moving out and social distancing due to pandemic social media platforms were the medium to share and purchase their essentials and other consumptions (Depoux et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 outbreak gave researchers scope to research on use of social media data to examine public perceptions, beliefs , issues related to pandemic (Brough & Martin, 2021; Nabity-Grover et al., 2020; Naeem, 2021).

Research studies in past have investigated how consumers change their consumption patterns and buying behaviors during expected life events and transitions (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2001; Mathur et al., 2003) and unexpected life events like natural disasters and social crises (Liu & Black, 2011; Liu et al., 2012).

Sneath et al. (2009) researched on Hurricane Katrina affected consumers and found that the disaster-induced stress led consumers to impulsive and compulsive buying behaviors as coping responses to manage their emotional states, recoup losses, and restore their sense of self. In case of financial stress caused by economic challenges or a lack of resources, consumers cope with hardship by changing their established purchasing patterns to reserve resources. Lee et al., 2001; Mathur et al., 2008 have found that consumers tend to be less wasteful by weighing and discussing their purchase decisions more often with their spouses, becoming more knowledgeable about various products and brands, and judging products and services more wisely.

During Pandemic researchers have identified different shopping patterns i.e panic buying, hoarding, rejecting (e.g., in-store shopping), changing discretionary spending and shifts in consumer mindset and focus on function, loss of interest in status-driven purchases, and interest in how the companies behind the brands are treating their employees (Knowles et al., 2020).

A research study by Sheth , 2020 brought out that the pandemic has significantly disrupted consumers' fashion clothing consumption. Since there were no occasions happening the purchase of such product category was not happening.

The current study is about a view point to examine consumers' responses to fashion product shopping post COVID-19 global pandemic and see whether it significantly varies with consumers fashion product shopping in pre COVID -19 era. The researcher formulated research questions for the study : 1.) Is there a change observed in consumers buying behaviour with reference to format i.e offline and online in pre and post covid -19 era. 2)Was there a shift in fashion buying in terms of brands in the pre and post COVID-19 era 3) Was there a shift in fashion buying in terms of essential and non essential fashion product categories in the pre and post COVID-19 era.

On the basis of Research questions formulated , the Research Objective was developed as follows:

Research Objectives

To study Indian customers' Fashion buying behaviour in Pre COVID-19 era and
Post COVID-19 era

Hypothesis

On the basis of research objective hypotheses were formulated which are as:

H1:In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Fashion Product through online shopping.
H2:In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Value for money homegrown brands .
H3:In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Basic Fashion categories .

H4:In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Fashion Product through online shopping.
H5:In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Value for money homegrown brands .
H6:In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Basic Fashion categories.

Methodology

The researcher thought about study in March 2021 and data collection was done during May – July 2021 . Primary Data was gathered using Online Personal Interview as a mode of data collection using structured questionnaire .The major source of secondary data in the review of literature were research papers published in National and International Journals. The sampling type for the viewers' was Non Probability Sampling method. Within Non Probability sampling method, judgmental sampling method was used. The sample size for viewers' survey was 5750, of which after editing 250 responses were processed for analysis. The sampling frame comprise of individual male and female in the age group of 18-50 years, residing in metro cities and are in the social and self esteem needs of Maslow Hierarchy of needs. The Primary data from viewers were collected from Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore and Hyderabad as per Table 1 below.The rational of choosing the sample from these cities are during pandemic these cities accounts for more than 50% cases and are also major fashion consumption centres and fashion retail growth centres.

S.No	City	Number of respondents
1	Delhi/ NCR	1500
2	Mumbai	1500
3	Bangalore	1500
4	Chennai	500

5	Hyderabad	500
	Total	5500

Table 1. City wise Sample size for Viewers survey

The researcher has used structured questionnaire with close ended questions, Likert scale questions and respondents profile in terms of demographic, geographic, psychographic and behavioral characteristics. This sample is true representation of the samples chosen from the cities as mentioned above.

After developing questionnaire and before starting the survey, a pilot test was conducted to find out whether respondents are comfortable to answer the questions. It was also tested to seeif they understand the questions in terms of language and technicalities. The pilot testing was done by interviewing 100 customers whose profile matches with the profile of the respondentswho were in the sampling frame of the research study. On the basis of problems found out while filling the questionnaire, changes were made and a final questionnaire was prepared forthe Interview. The data analysis was done using frequency table, means and t test using SPSS
18.0 Version.

Analysis

The customers' perceptions were studied to determine influence of COVID-19 on their fashion buying behaviour. The opinion of viewers was sought using five point Likert scale. The analysis of the opinions of the respondents on these five attributes is presented in Tables below.

	Pre COVID-19		Post COVID-19	
Customers Inclination towards online shopping	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	2159	39.3	360	6.52
Disagree	1289	23.4	440	8.00
Neutral	423	8	1000	18.20

Agree	730	13.3	750	13.64
Strongly Agree	899	16	2950	53.64
Total	5500	100	5500	100

Table. 2 Customers Perception on "Customers inclination towards online shopping in Pre and Post COVID-19 era"

As shown in the table above more than 60% of the respondents were in disagreement to the opinion that Customers were more inclined towards online shopping in Pre COVID-19 era while 66% of the customers were in agreement that they became more inclined towards online shopping post COVID-19

Customers Inclination towards Value for money homegrown brands	Pre COVID-19		Post COVID-19	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	3370	61.3	260	4.7
Disagree	965	17.5	290	5.3
Neutral	421	7.7	355	6.5
Agree	230	4.2	1644	29.9
Strongly Agree	514	9.3	2951	53.6
Total	5500	100	5500	100

Table. 3 Customers Perception on "Customers Inclination towards Value for money homegrown brands in Pre and Post COVID -19 era"

As shown in the table above more than 75 % of the respondents were in disagreement to the opinion that Customers were more inclined towards value for money homegrown brands in Pre COVID-19 era while more than 80% agreed that Post COVID-19 they became more inclined towards value for money homegrown brands.

Customers Inclination towards Basic Fashion categories	Pre COVID-19		Post COVID-19	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	2423	44.1	322	5.9
Disagree	1765	32.1	722	13.1
Neutral	799	14.5	721	13.1
Agree	216	3.9	1113	20.2
Strongly Agree	297	5.4	2622	47.7
Total	5500	100	5500	100

Table. 4 Customers Perception on customers Inclination towards Basic Fashion categories in Pre COVID -19 and Post COVID-19

As shown in the table above around 76% of the respondents were in disagreement to the opinion that Customers were more inclined towards Basic Fashion categories in Pre COVID-19 era while more than 65% agreed that Post COVID-19 they became more inclined towards Basic Fashion categories..

The discussion of frequency tables above clearly indicates that COVID-19 has influenced the buying behaviour of respondents as has been clearly brought out in the 3 tables above where there is clear difference in their perception towards the three statements in pre and post COVID -19 era . But the above difference in perception in these 2 era needs to be statistically validated hence the above result were also tested using Mean values of the opinions. The scales used were 1 to 5 (where 1 is strongly disagree, 2 is Disagree, 3 is Neutral, 4 is Agree and 5 is Strongly Agree). A mean value above 3 indicates that the opinion is averaged towards the agreement on the opinion.

The following table indicates mean values in Pre COVID-19 and Post COVID-19 era

Statements related to Influence of COVID-19 on customers buying Attitude	Pre COVID-19	Post COVID-19

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Customers are more inclined towards online shopping in Post COVID-19 era compare to Pre COVID -19 era	5500	2.40	1.14	5500	3.9	1.09
Customers are more inclined towards Value for money homegrown brands in Post COVID-19 era compare to Pre COVID -19 era	5500	1.80	1.07	5500	4.2	1.17
Customers are more inclined towards Basic Fashion categories in Post COVID -19 era compared to Pre COVID-19	5500	1.9	1.02	5500	3.90	1.09

Table 5. Customer perception –mean value in Pre COVID -19 and Post COVID-19

As can be seen from the table above in all the three statements in Post COVID-19 era the mean value is above 3 which is an indication of agreement of the respondents to the statements that:

- Customers are more inclined towards online shopping in Post COVID-19 era compare to Pre COVID -19 era
- Customers are more inclined towards Value for money homegrown brands in Post COVID-19 era compare to Pre COVID -19 era
- Customers are more inclined towards Basic Fashion categories in Post COVID -19 era compared to Pre COVID-19

However , in Pre COVID-19 scenario the mean values for all the 3 statements are less than 3 which indicates that customers are in disagreement to these statements.

The opinions were finally tested for significance. To test the opinions for the significance, the following hypothesis were used.

H1:In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Fashion Product through online shopping.

H2:In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Value for money homegrown brands .

H3:In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Basic Fashion categories .

H4:In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Fashion Product through online shopping.

H5:In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Value for money homegrown brands .

H6:In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Basic Fashion categories .

Test Value =3			
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Fashion Product through online shopping	-11.119	5499	.000
In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Value for money homegrown brands	-12.137	5499	.013
In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Basic Fashion categories .	-12.229	5499	.000

Table. 6 T test for Fashion customers perception on Fashion buying in Pre COVID-19 era

Test Value =3			
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Fashion Product through online shopping	16.123	5499	.001
In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Value for money homegrown brands	14.111	5499	.011
In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Basic Fashion categories .	13.339	5499	.002

Table. 7 T test for Fashion customers perception on Fashion buying in Post COVID-19 era

Results

On the basis of the T test results above in Table 6 and Table 7, the following can be interpreted for the hypothesis.

- In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were not significantly inclined towards buying Fashion Product through online shopping.
- In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were not significantly inclined towards buying Value for money homegrown brands.
- In Pre COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were not significantly inclined towards buying Basic Fashion categories.
- In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Fashion Product through online shopping
- In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Value for money homegrown brands.
- In Post COVID -19 era Fashion Customers were significantly inclined towards buying Basic Fashion categories.

Thus it can be interpreted from the results above using frequency , means and T test results that in Pre COVID-19 era Fashion customers were not significantly inclined towards online shopping , Value for money homegrown brands and Basic Fashion categories but in post

COVID-19 they significantly inclined towards online shopping , Value for money homegrown brands and Basic Fashion categories.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, the influence of COVID-19 on customers Fashion buying behaviour was examined. There are many studies done during pandemic and after pandemic on influence of pandemic on customers buying of FMCG, electronics and specialty product category but lack of research about the influence of COVID-19 on customers Fashion buying behaviour in context of Indian retail Industry in different parts of India was not found . Thus researcher undertook this study and developed the research paper.

The author reviewed the research work done by various researchers in this area and compiled the same in the form of review of literature. On the basis of review of literature, the gap was identified and research objectives , hypothesis and research methodology were formulated. This was followed by primary data collection where customers were interviewed through structured questionnaire to capture their buying perception of fashion product category in Pre and Post COVID-19 era.

The findings brought out that there is a significant influence of COVID-19 on customers buying behaviour with reference to their inclination towards online shopping of fashion products, inclination towards basic fashion categories and inclination towards value for money home grown brands.

The Indian retailers and Fashion brands should realize that the fear of pandemic has significantly influenced the fashion consumers buying behaviour and hence they should make significant changes in their business models in terms of retailers making its products available online if not at present. Also the retailers should add basic fashion product categories more in their merchandise mix. The home grown brands which are considered by customers as value for money brands should be encouraged by retailers and give them significant space in their shelf and in online format.

This study is equally encouraging for the start up as research have brought out that customers are getting inclined towards value for money home grown brands. This is the right time for entrepreneurs to enter into fashion business by creating economical, basic fashion categories which is conceptualized, developed and produced at home.

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