

DYNAMICS IN ACADEMICS AND CONSUMER RESEARCH IN POST-COVID-19 SCENARIO

Tejinder Sharma

*Department of Commerce
Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, India
Email: tsharma@kuk.ac.in*

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most unprecedented event in the human history as its impact is truly global, impacting each and every facet of human existence. In this turbulent scenario, education has witnessed a major disruption throughout the world. Online teaching has been construed as switching over to the online platforms to deliver the lectures, which is a good stop-gap arrangement. If it has to be ingrained into the system, then it has to be blended with the operations. Academic leadership catering to vast majority of the resource deficit population needs to take measures to bridge the digital and knowledge divide and the real change will come with bottom-up empowerment.

On the consumption front, there is a notable change in the consumers' purchasing behaviour and some of this change is likely to be permanent. The economic uncertainty and instability has fostered transformation in consumer behaviour and there is sustained focus on value and frugality. Crisis has also generated interest into spiritualism and the consumers are revisiting the traditional wisdom, which might influence their thinking and behaviour in the days to come. Consumer research shows that about two-third of the consumers may shift back to normal purchase soon after the pandemic while a few others who have experienced loss of employment or reduction of their incomes will economize on their purchasing. Marketers need to account for this shift in their strategy and need to develop the products and their marketing campaigns to accommodate these trends.

Keywords: *Online Teaching, Consumer research, frugality, value buying, bottom-up empowerment*

Background

COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most unprecedented event in the human history as its impact is truly global, impacting each and every facet of human existence. Commencing as a health pandemic, this has had an impact at macro as well as micro levels. Right from impacting the economy and earnings of the nations and individuals, political issues within the nations and between the nations, inter-personal relations within the societies, the new normal is making its existence felt and probably it will take decades before a new stability may be achieved. There have been pandemics, economic slowdowns and

wars between nations, but this scenario is different because the magnanimity of the pandemic induced impacts and the disruption of the value chains are the key differentiators. The world never came to a standstill of this nature for so long and it is because of this disruption that the fulcrum of delicate balance between the subcomponents of the socio-economic systems is undergoing a key change.

In this turbulent scenario, education has witnessed a major disruption throughout the world. Classrooms are seen as the boiling pots for fomenting the pandemic and their physical closure is taken as a

viable step to containing the pandemic. Surprisingly, most of the other avenues such as the markets, gymnasiums, political activities, gatherings, etc. with larger potential of spreading the pandemic have slowly gathered momentum towards normalcy, but the education institutions remain devoid of students. Despite having technology as a major savior to reach out to the students, online teaching is far from being a substitute for offline teaching. Education is not just dissemination of information from the sender to the receiver, but is a tool for shaping the individuals, carving them to be true professionals and useful members of the society. The very act of attending a class and learning from the teacher shaped the personality of the students, but that new normal is still away.

If the colleges and universities are opened without checks and balances, they bear the risk of launching an exponential spread of the infection as the youth may not maintain social distance. The facilities such as classrooms, hostels and food may not be sterile enough to check the spread of infection. Other sectors faced similar risks, but the phased unlocking can be extrapolated to the higher education as well. There are several options that can be exercised and stepwise measures can help in resuming their functioning within the new normal. More than the pandemic, it's the mindset that has disrupted the education. Academic leadership needs out of the box solutions to restore the normalcy and newer methods of student engagement and evaluation have to be thought of. The knowledge divide is far greater than the digital divide. Its two batches of students who have suffered the most. The cause of the problem is that it's a top-down approach and not a bottom-up decentralized strategy, which can be far more fruitful. Online teaching has been construed as switching over to the online platforms to deliver the lectures, which is a good stop-gap arrangement. If it has to

be ingrained into the system, then it has to be blended with the operations.

Scenario Analysis for online teaching

In the present times, three scenarios of the growth and control of the pandemic, and its impact on the online teaching can be predicted. In the first scenario, which is optimistic, it is assumed that the pandemic will be contained in short run as the news of the vaccine will be available in the market and we will be able to resume the normal offline teaching. In such a case, the online teaching can be a good supplement to the classroom interactions. In India, even the use of ICT based gadgets and tools was facing slow adaptation, but the pandemic has broken that mindset and the teachers and students have familiarized themselves to this newer platform for dissemination of teaching.

In the realistic scenario, it is predicted that the pandemic will subside, but not to the extent that normal classroom teaching can begin, at least for coming two sessions as it is difficult to vaccinate billions of people within a few months. There will be uncertainties and disruptions and in such a case, a blend of online and offline interactions is predicted. There is a need for out-of-box thinking to slowly bring the students back to the campuses for enrichment of their online teaching experience. By moderating the flow of students, the norms of pandemic control can be implemented and slowly the momentum can be picked up.

The third scenario is pessimistic, in which we do not expect the things to get better and we have to rely on the herd immunity to overcome the pandemic. In such a scenario, the resumption of normal classroom teaching is less likely and our systems have to gear up to having more of online teaching and evaluation. Academic leadership catering to vast majority of the resource deficit

population needs to take measures to bridge the digital and knowledge divide. Real change will come with bottom-up empowerment. Teacher in class has to make use of the online platforms for extended learning, beyond the confines of the classrooms. Teaching is a highly scientific process and a judicious mix of the online and classroom interactions has to be developed. Merely making the digital content is not the end of the story. Teachers have to do the handholding of the students and explain the concepts in online/offline interactions. Online platforms have the added advantage of flexi-learning, interactivity and handling of doubts and teachers have to be trained to achieve this purpose. The limitations of infrastructure and connectivity are not big enough in the present times, which cannot be overcome.

Business and consumer research in pandemic regime

A seminal research has been done by Verma and Gustafsson (2020) analysed 107 research papers published in Scopus and Web of Science indexed journals during the period January to May 2020 using bibliometric study of COVID-19 research in business and management domain. The analysis of the published literature identified four main research themes and 18 sub-themes. The findings and propositions of this study suggest that COVID-19 will be the catalyst of several long- and short-term policy changes and requires the theoretical and empirical attention of researchers. The subthemes underlying the overall impact of COVID-19 on business and management entail decision making, risk management, supply chain dynamics, human behaviour, etc. Researchers have also focused on studying the impact on value chains, start-ups, trade, employment and risk. Technology being a major enabler during the supply chain disruption has generated lot of interest of the researchers. Similarly, the research on service industry, including travel and

tourism, online education and essential services has been interest for the researchers. The study envisages further research in these broad domains.

Mehta, Saxena and Purohit (2020) observe that the economic uncertainty and instability has fostered transformation in consumer behaviour and there is sustained focus on value and frugality. Crisis has also generated interest into spiritualism and the consumers are revisiting the traditional wisdom, which might influence their thinking and behaviour in the days to come. A study by Accenture reinforce the belief that some of the changes in consumer behaviour will be permanent and will transform the industry's future. The study found that the consumer purchases centred on basic needs and people were shopping consciously. Digital connect is being increasingly relied upon for managing isolation and building virtual workforces. A study of Fahmy and Sohani (2020) observe that there is not a major shift in the preferred brands during the pandemic, although there is increase in health consciousness and qualitative demands on brands due to pandemic affecting brand preference. Lee (2020) observes thirteen ways that consumer behaviour is evolving in the post pandemic scenario. There is lesser enthusiasm for in-store visits and even the extravagant consumers are concerned about their shopping spree. With shifting workplace to home, there is a marked shift in the buying habits. Consumers have flexible time management and increased demand for remote work product and technologies. Contactless payments, virtual interactions, hunting for value and economizing the purchases, increasing acceptability of digital platforms is a major development and marketers are learning to incorporate them into their marketing strategy. Lee observes the emergence of social good, which is gaining the importance in the minds of the consumers. These trends are going to influence the spending and buying habits of the consumers.

Schachinger (2020) observes that while e-commerce, online purchase, media consumption, connecting to family and concentrating on personal finances are some of the most interesting developments after the pandemic. The top three bills of most concern for the consumers in the days to come are the utility bills, credit cards, and rent followed by auto loans, mortgage payments, and student loans. This would seem to be a great time for financial services and other related firms to get creative and continue to stay involved with their customers to help them weather the storm.

Ernst & Young surveyed consumer behaviour sentiment across five markets and tracked the spending habits, attitude towards COVID-19, data privacy and consumer trust. The study found that 42% of the consumers believe that their shopping will fundamentally change. Five consumer segments are likely to emerge in the post-pandemic scenario. These segments include "Keep cutting" (13.1%), "Stay frugal" (21.7%), "Get to normal" (31.4%), "Cautiously extravagant" (24.7%) and "Back with a bang" (9.1%). These segments are arranged in order of their propensity to economize their purchasing due to pandemic on one end, and to resume normal pre-pandemic purchase and lifestyle on the other end. About two-third of the consumers may shift back to normal purchase soon after the pandemic while a few others who have experienced loss of employment or reduction of their incomes will economize on their purchasing. Marketers need to account for this shift in their strategy and need to develop the products and their marketing campaigns to accommodate these trends.

Nail (2020) advocates that in delivering the brand messages in the pandemic regime, the marketers should focus on three key areas. Firstly, they need to explain the brand precautions and ease

out the fears with operational messaging on the expected consumer experience. Secondly, there is a need to reinforcing product value and its place during pandemic with brand messaging and thirdly they need to use empathy to enrich the brand image with value based messaging and positioning the brand as a source of comfort and reassurance. Such a strategy will contribute to better brand building in the post pandemic scenario. McKinsey study by Arora et.al (2020) finds that pandemic is changing the consumer behaviour in at least six different ways, which the marketers need to adopt. Consumers adoption of digital platforms for shopping and entertainment in eight weeks of pandemic surpassed the adoption of last five years and acceptability of e-services has increased. With people working and staying at home, there is an increasing influence of home on entertainment and other such products under consumption. With greater community and neighborhood interaction local businesses are finding more preference and firms will have to manage hyperlocal engagement as a part of their strategy. Building trust and holding brands to higher standards is the key to success of the marketing strategy in the post-pandemic scenario.

To Sum Up

Pandemic has given a halt to the fast moving life and its consequent hedonistic consumption behaviour. It has induced introspection and generated some thoughts for answering the very basic questions of human behaviour and existence, which we had left far behind in the rat race of materialism. This paradigm shift has happened with everyone and the academics and the consumer research is a part of this whole process. Marketing strategy needs to understand this basic shift in consumer thinking and behaviour, which is here to stay, at least for a few more years until the economy gains the momentum again. Technology

driven marketing strategies, focused on value delivery are likely to be far more successful than bias for skimming and differentiation. To achieve this, then entire corporate strategy encompassing the product design, operations, pricing and value delivery have to work in unison. There is an opportunity for the local businesses to realign themselves and dwell upon the present positive consumer sentiment to establish themselves into the marketplaces. Hopefully, the new normal can contribute to a more inclusive distribution of wealth and a happier world to live in.

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