

Need for a New Marketing Blue Print for a Pandemic Induced New Normal

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present a commentary on the impact Covid19 had on consumers and the resulting shifts in the consumption patterns. By reviewing the existing literature on this novel topic and conducting focus group interviews, the authors have attempted to present a succinct overview of the changes in consumer behaviour.

After the World Health Organization declared the COVID 19 as a global pandemic, the healthcare crisis soon turned out to be an economic challenge as governments around the world initiated lockdowns of business and national and regional boundaries. As citizens were confined to their homes, new patterns of consumption behaviour started to emerge. Demand for new types of products and services meant that organizations had to display agility in their strategy formulation. The never before seen economic shutdown posed challenges for organizations that some were not prepared for. This paper also explores some of the challenges and opportunities these changes presented to organizations, particularly the global marketing domain. Organizations soon had to adapt to the new rules of social distancing and invent strategies to ensure survival and customer retention and growth. The paper also presents an overview of certain strategies that marketers can adapt to steer their organizations through the post COVID world.

KEYWORDS: COVID 19, Brand Management, Marketing Strategies, Consumer Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

In the month of December 2019, China notified the World Health Organization (WHO) of a certain Pneumonia kind of disease that was starting to grip a small town in China. It was still three months before WHO would eventually declare COVID-19 as a pandemic in March

2020. The fear caused by uncertainty and lack of knowledge about the virus played a vital role in the world's response to SARS-

a coronavirus not previously detected in humans (Shannon and Willoughby, 2004; Peiris et al., 2004). It is similarly reflected in the way Governments reacted to COVID-19.

A medical crisis soon turned into an economic challenge as governments around the world resorted to border closure to restrict human interaction, thereby controlling the spread of the virus. This resulted in shrinkage of the global supply chain putting severe pressure on certain businesses like travel and restaurants. IMF has described the economic disruptions as the worst since the great depression (Jones et al., 2020). European and Indian economies took a big hit with India's GDP shrinking by a massive 24%, majorly due to the strict lockdown of 68 days. Stressful life events cause people to start, intensify, or change their consumption patterns in order to cope with the stress (Mathur, Moschis, and Lee 2003). In the case of COVID-19, or the novel coronavirus-19, the general population of each nation began a stock-up mindset within two weeks of learning of the virus's existence in their country. Medical supplies, rubbing alcohol, antibacterial wipes, first aid kits, antiseptics, cold and flu remedies, and cough remedies became priorities when this preparedness mindset took hold (Nielsen, 2020). COVID-19 is having a lasting impact on the kind of products consumers purchase and also the kind of brands they associate with. There are the most visible shifts in consumers' willingness to spend on necessities and reduce the purchase of non-essential goods and services. Consumers have become conscious of the purchases and making an effort to restrict unnecessary spending and wastages (Sayegh, 2021). Accenture consumer research (2020), conducted between the 2nd and 6th of April, also found that during the COVID-19 outbreak, an increase in consumer interest has led to a shift in consumer preferences, with demand for hygiene, cleaning, and staples items skyrocketing while non-essential categories plummeted. As the restrictions imposed by the governments impacted the availability of regularly established brands consumers we are forced to try local solutions and many times consumers had to try new brands as they were the only option available. If this change manages to offer value to the consumers and satisfy their needs there is a high probability that this change will stay even after the pandemic is over (Puttaiah et al., 2020). As per a report published by KPMG consumers, overall trust in brands has taken a hit during this pandemic. There has been a significant rise in appreciation and love for local brands (Wright and Blackburn, 2020). New habits are emerging as consumers are restricted to their homes. Home has become the new office school entertainment Park. The line between work and personal life is increasingly becoming blurred as consumers are working from home and many planning to do so for a considerable period of time in the future. All these changes have put pressure on different corporations to come up with strategies that required them to reprioritize their spending and planned marketing and operational activities.

In this paper, the author has attempted to highlight some of the shifts that have taken place in consumer psychology and the challenges or opportunities this has created for different corporations. The paper also looks at certain strategies that firms can look to adopt going forward. As brand relations have been reset during the current crisis, brands need to go back to the drawing board and rework their strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative focus group interviews were used in this exploratory analysis. This approach was chosen for this study because it is effective in revealing customer experiences such as consumer behaviour (Liu and Murphy, 2007). The authors have also used secondary data related to the COVID crisis from reports and papers published by different consulting firms and government agencies to provide a better perspective on the magnitude of the impact of this pandemic. The focus group interviews were

conducted

with 35 individuals in four separate batches to collect qualitative data for presenting a better understanding of shifts in consumer behaviour and to suggest probable remodelling of marketing strategies in a post-pandemic world. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The advantage of taking a focus group interview is to derive perception and ideas that provide a rich understanding of the research questions and research problem. Closed and open-ended questions were used in the focus group discussions to gather both standardised and unexpected answers (Chisnall, 1997).

The focus group discussions were analysed by transcribing the interviews and sorting the data into different groups. The transcriptions were then read over to look for ideas. A coding process helped the data to be organised in different clusters.

PROFILE OF THE FOCUS GROUP

35 individuals belonging to different age groups were selected based on the purposive method of sampling and four separate discussion groups were formed and interviews were conducted to develop an understanding of the way the pandemic has impacted their lifestyle with a special focus on their consumption-related behaviour. Four distinct groups were formed based on the age and gender of participants. Group 1 was made of ten males in the age group of 22 to 28 and Group 2 was made of eight female participants in the age group of 23 to 27. Group 3 had seven males in the age group of 32 to 40 and the final Group 4 consisted of ten female participants in the age group of 30-35.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The paper is written with the following objectives:

- To analyse the ways, the current pandemic has impacted the consumption-related behaviour of consumers.
- To explore some of the shifts in consumer psychology caused by the current pandemic and the resulting opportunities and challenges for modern organisations.
- To present strategies that brands can look to adopt to engage with their consumers on the influence of the crisis subsides.

The world could not have been prepared for the current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though WHO hinted at an impending health crisis to be caused by a virus around September 2020, lack of media attention led to a less prepared global economy. The pandemic-related non-financial crisis rapidly turned into an economic challenge across various industries sparking financial meltdowns (Kumar, 2020, p. 4).

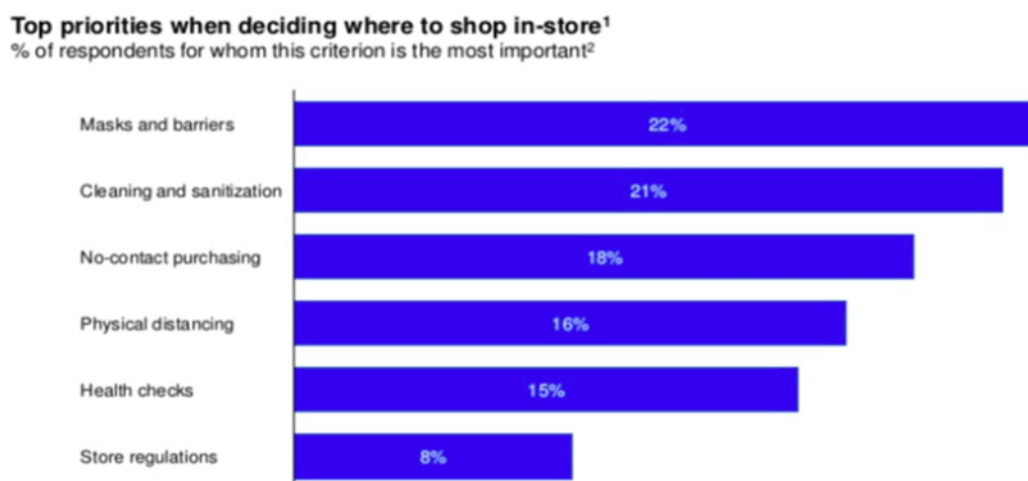
There were uncoordinated decisions made in the worldwide movement of people and goods as the majority of countries responded with border closure (Kumar, 2020, p. 5). The governments around the world responded by shutting down borders to restrict the spread of virus caused by human interaction thereby confining citizens at their homes.

This in turn led to certain shifts in consumer behaviour thus requiring agility in marketing strategies of corporations to ensure consumer satisfaction and retention. The following section of this paper discusses some of these shifts in consumer behaviour and present probable strategies that brands can look to adopt in a post-COVID world. The focus group discussions were analysed and the categories identified from the analysis have been presented in the following sections of the paper.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CONSUMERS

The Covid-19 crisis has reshaped consumer behaviour and thus how marketers respond. The marketing tactics employed before and during the lockdown bear some resemblance to how marketing is conducted during a recession. However, some differences have emerged as a result of the current economic downturn. For example, besides a fall in consumption caused by lower-income and dwindling consumer confidence, consumption shifts are taking place between different product categories. Consumers have been forced to re-evaluate their priorities thus giving rise to new values and buying decision criteria.

Figure 1: Criteria used for choosing retail outlets



Source: McKinsey Report, 2020

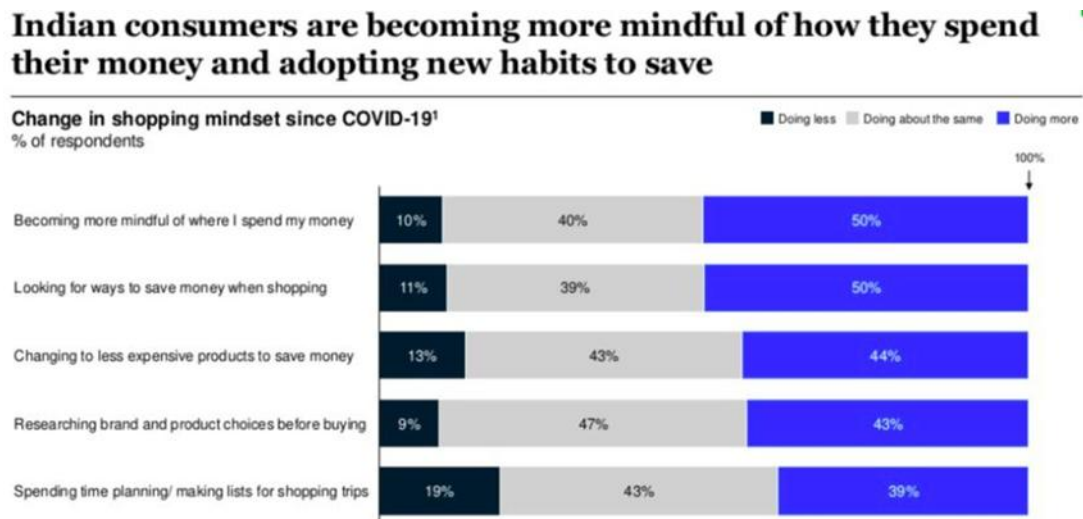
Figure 1 demonstrates how the pandemic has caused a major shift in the criteria used by consumers while choosing an offline shopping experience. There is a visible shift in terms of the store selection criteria, a shift from product assortment and price range to hygiene and measures taken by stores to ensure the safety of the shoppers. The focus group revealed a similar mind set is reflected in consumer's choice of transportation modes as well as hangout or entertainment spots. Some of the young participants revealed that their workout schedules have been impacted as many neighbourhood gyms have not implemented safety protocols and there is a shift in their preferred workout time caused by a willingness to avoid crowds.

“Since the news channels started reporting about the presence of asymptomatic patients, I am scared to visit crowded places as my mother who is a heart patient, is staying with me ..” (Male, Group 1)

“..cancelled my daughter's birthday celebrations..was worried about the wellbeing of other kids who were supposed to attend” (Female, Group 4)

As is revealed by the research conducted by McKinsey, Indian consumers are spending more time researching what items to buy and is not willing to spend time looking for solutions inside the store. The focus group discussions also revealed a similar sentiment, whereby participants acknowledged the economic scepticism that the current crisis has caused and how it is making them re-evaluate their priorities causing the postponement of a certain category of purchases. Consumers whose income has been impacted are looking for low priced alternatives and there also has been a major shift to online shopping for home essentials.

Figure 2: Impact on shopping behaviour



Source: McKinsey Report, 2020

Participants with aged parents or young kids at home have been more cautious while venturing out of home and have mostly avoided unnecessary shopping trips. The majority of the participants report an increase in the amount of time they spend on online shopping websites and apps.

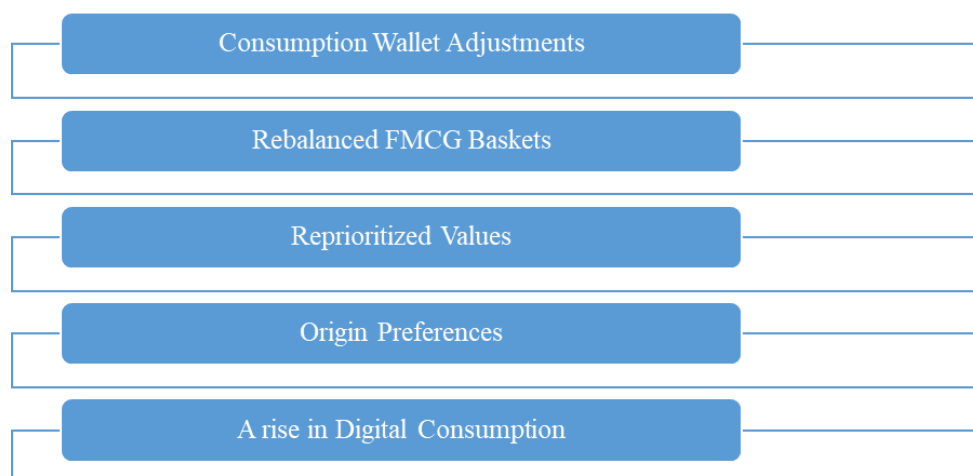
"My father, who was not in favour of shopping over the phone, has been ordering through apps .." (Female, Group 2)

".. only go out to shop for a change, that too with all precautions" (Female, Group 4)

MAJOR AREAS OF SHIFTS IN CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

As the vaccines have made a rollout in different parts of the world, travel and living restrictions have been eased around the world. Consumers have started to be more comfortable stepping out of their homes compared to the middle of last year. But some visible shifts have taken place in their market behaviour caused by the speculation on the effectiveness of the vaccine and long-term confinement inside homes. As the news of a shrinking economy led to fear of job loss, consumers started being conservative in their approach. The focus group discussions highlighted certain changes that have taken place in consumption-related behaviour. The analysis of the transcript and the coding process revealed that there are certain similarities in the participant experiences and five identified themes or categories are represented in the following section of this paper.

Figure 3: Five identified themes or categories for the paper



CIRCUMSTANCES FORCED IN ADJUSTMENTS OF WALLETS

Consumers have started adjusting their available spending based on the circumstances that they face. Even though certain initial cutbacks will be done as a precaution, we may see the cutbacks becoming a compulsion as incomes are constrained due to an uncertain economy and uncertainty caused by the doubts over efficacy and availability of the vaccines.

Consumers who predominantly belong to the higher or middle-income group, who experienced minimal impact on their earnings have the freedom to spend on things that they need and even may trade up in certain categories to make up for the restricted living conditions. If the uncertainty extends even to this group of consumers, they may display a conservative spending pattern.

The customers whose financial condition has been impacted by the restrictions will look to seek ways to make savings and look for value from their purchases. Their indulgences may be restricted as they will look for low-cost alternatives or postpone their purchase activity for a period of time.

“used the time at home to learn to cook different dishes that we would otherwise order from outside” (Female, Group 2).

“.. compared to before meals at home became simple and traditional” (Male, Group 1)

“.. cannot keep spending like last year ... pay cuts have impacted house budget...” (Male, Group 3)

“I had planned a family trip to abroad in 2020 which could not happen due to this COVID ... waiting for things to become normal ...” (Female, Group 4)

A CHANGE IN THE FMCG BASKET

Even as the living restrictions have been eased throughout the global economy, there is an emergence of a “homebody culture”. This culture is curated by consumers’ “unwillingness to indulge in out-of-home experiences like pre-covid times. Even though initially forced, consumers have become increasingly comfortable with spending on

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meathome. The category that has benefitted from this change in mindset is the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) category, but consumers have been reprioritising and rebalancing the offerings and price within the category.

Focus group participants who represent this section of the consumers, who have been insulated, have experienced an increase in their savings. They initially may indulge in luxuries, treats and premiums once the economy fully opens up and allows free movement.

Cooking at home will be supplemented by take aways and home deliveries. Conservative consumers initially may indulge in small treats but if the uncertainty continues may seek out low-cost solutions even downgrading to private labels especially in the staple categories.

".. Eating home-cooked food daily is boring ... looking forward to eating out ..." (Male, group 3)

"Started trying local options in atta and daal (wheat and pulses) to reduce the financial burden"

(Female, Group 4)

REPRIORITISATION OF VALUES

Well-being, security and affirmations of qualities have become a significant criterion in brand/item decisions. These attributes will conceivably be significant drivers of decision making in the close and long haul future. Buyers will put more accentuation on these specific attributes and focus on them over other brand promises. As reported by Nielsen consumers now believe promises of killing germs, boosting immunity and promoting health are more relevant than claims of sustainability product quality and brand. In the food and beverages category, consumers now place more importance on products that offer health benefits and immunity benefits while considering more natural alternatives. The focus group discussions also revealed that families with kids and aged citizens are more careful while buying home care products. They are more sensitive to properties that ensure safety and protection from germs and viruses. Having an understanding and appreciation of which product claims are and most important to consumers, firms will be able to create loyalty as well as charge premium for certain prioritised attributes.

"I read labels more carefully ... look for hygiene" (Male, Group 1)

"Our eating of fruits have increased compared to other times" (Male, Group 3)

PREFERENCES ON ORIGIN

As supply chain around the world shrank, majorly due to the border restrictions imposed by national and state government's consumer's preference for locally made solutions emerged as an important criterion in making product or brand decisions. As different governments imposed living restrictions, consumers started relying on local and micro local products. There are even instances in certain categories where local has been the only source of supply. Going forward consumers may be willing to patronise brands and suppliers who are local and whose support and promote their local communities. Governments should look to utilise this trend and support local manufacturers who would be able to increase their portf

oligo and infrastructure. This trend is already impacting the assortment decisions in retail outlets. Mr. Ranjith, a participating group 2 said that his local Kirana shop has helped him immensely by ensuring a continuous supply of essentials during the lockdown. He feels that the store had done a great service to the household in his locality and feels a sense of gratitude towards that shop. He has since then continued visiting that store compared to the Hypermarket that he used to visit that was located inside a shopping Centre.

A RISE IN DIGITAL CONSUMPTION

The current pandemic has impacted the way we live our lives in ways that have forced many to adapt to technological innovations. As families spend more time together, the desire for new content grew. Content suppliers like Netflix and Amazon Prime observed a massive increase in subscriber base around the world. As work from home got prolonged, corporations were forced to invent opportunities for online meetings, thereby leading to novelties in the video conferencing domain. As children attended classes from their homes, there was pressure on academic institutions to quickly adapt to this challenge and come up with engaging and innovative content. Being locked at home meant that consumers across different generations consumed different online contents like news, information and entertainment.

Figure 4: Rise in Digital Media Consumption since Lockdown



Source: WPP

“classes were very different online... eyes hurt after day-long sessions” (Female, Group 2)

“Watching movies on Netflix was good family time...TV channels were playing old programs...” (Male, Group 3)

“No live sports... streamed old cricket matches on YouTube” (Male, Group 1)

OPPORTUNITIES CREATED OUT OF CRISIS

The shifts in consumption-related behaviour have not only caused distress, but for some brands and certain categories, it has created new opportunities. Certain products and services have gained customers during this pandemic phase and may have contributed to some of these behaviour changes in a more permanent manner. These shifts have not similarly impacted everyone. Even while many firms have suffered huge financial losses, certain firms have displayed great agility and adapted their business models to the need of the hour.

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The video conferencing application ZOOM may have permanently impacted how adults work and kids study. This brand along with other video conferencing applications witnessed phenomenal growth. It has helped corporations and schools continue productivity while ensuring the safety of their employees and students. The hand sanitizer category witnessed huge demand as many brands shifted their strategy to enter this market and make a profit. As consumers were confined at home the consumption of entertainment on mobile devices also saw a rise and companies like Netflix witnessed the biggest ever addition to their global consumer base during this pandemic. An Indian company called Suparshva Swabs benefited from increased demand for polyesters wabs that were previously imported from China. The company created a capacity for catering to the pan-India demand for polyesters wabs by converting its factory in Ghaziabad into a sub-manufacturing company. Shree Shakti Enterprises that is in the business of manufacturing and selling essential kitchen wares faced hurdles due to the lockdown and as non-essential purchases were postponed. Shree Shakti was quick to understand the demand for hand sanitizers and took advantage of the opportunity by venturing into hand-free hand wash solutions and sensor-based sanitizer dispensers. Many companies have adapted their manufacturing to suit the increasing demand for PPE kits and face masks. Big brands like Puma, Lee Cooper, Wild Craft and Nykaa has also launched face masks bearing their logos.

RETHINKING STRATEGIES GOING FORWARD

The current COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of disruption in the usual way that consumers have made their purchase decisions and brand choices. A lot of brand relationships have been reset during these challenging times. There is a breach of trust and the pre-COVID marketing slogans may no longer work. Brands need to offer promises and solutions to re-engage in a conversation that restores the trust. Consumers have started to look for locally made locally available suppliers that have given rise to different opportunities for the local manufacturers while challenging the big brands to adapt to this new psychology and engage the customers. Some strategies that brands may look to adopt heading into the reopening of the economy is discussed in the following sections.

NEED FOR AN AGILE MEDIA STRATEGY

Since circumstances change rapidly, marketers must build faster machinery within their organisations or in collaboration with outside agencies to create motivated, meaningful, and engaging content. Companies would also need to improve their ability to participate in production from a distance. COVID-19 has also changed the media outlets that consumers use. A lot of growth has happened on the digital entertainment platform thus fashioning an opportunity for the use of ad-supported premium video streaming and mobile gaming. As with any catastrophe, this current pandemic also saw an increase in consumption of news as consumers tried to stay conversant. Brands need to quickly take a relook at their advertising budget allocation and utilise this change in media consumption habits. Brands should carefully make use of this trend by scrutinising the engagement and restraining the craving for too much exposure which may corrode the brand equity.

NEED TO DISPLAY EMPATHY

Just like any other crisis to have impacted human civilization, this COVID pandemic has also touched lives in more than one way, physical, psychological and financial. Brands need to be careful in the way

they engage with their customers. People are vulnerable as the crisis has squeezed their finances and many have been laid off. As speculation over the efficiency of the vaccine continues; customers will take some time before they feel secured both financially and emotionally. Brands need to respect customers and display humility. The approach should be to reduce the burden on consumers and make them feel valued and cared for. Banks may look to waive off certain fees to lighten the burden on customers. Food delivery partners may look to reduce the commission and help out restaurants during these difficult times. The tone of the brand is of paramount importance during this time. Brands that look to exploit the current situation and make a profit will not fare well with the target market. Brands should let people know how they are contributing to the communities around them and look to rebuild the trust that has decayed during this pandemic.

EMPHASISING IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES

As consumers have started valuing certain attributes over others specifically in categories like food and beverage and home care, marketers need to pay attention to the features they highlight. Marketers should focus on communicating value as well as emphasize traits like hygiene, natural ingredients and fresh and locally sourced resources. Health and safety have become a concern for consumers around the world, thus prompting a shift in the values they seek from a product. As consumers keep looking for these aspects when they make their purchase decisions brands should rework their advertisements and packaging.

TRACKING TRENDS

Marketers must continuously monitor shifts in consumer psychology to gain better insights. A corporation would like to measure sentiments regularly to better adapt operations, have close scrutiny of dialogues on digital platforms like social media and community sites and e-commerce platforms to ascertain opportunities. Companies should be able to swiftly adjust their approaches with the changes in consumer preferences. The marketing team should develop deeper connections with their financial and operations counterparts to be able to predict scenarios faster.

DEVELOPING NEW METHODS OF WORK AND DELIVERY

One of the most impacted areas of the pandemic has been the workplace and how companies engage with their partners and clients. Many companies have been forced to adopt remote work culture with innovation taking place in the virtual working places such as the concept of "virtual happy hours". Corporate leaders have to take the lead to ensure the transition of their functional centres to the post-COVID scenario. Companies have to ensure they can work in a coordinated manner and still be able to deliver creative outputs.

CONCLUSION

The COVID 19 threw challenges that the world was not prepared for. Consumers were forced to re-evaluate their purchase decisions and shopping criteria in light of forced restrictions and health concerns. Brands that have seen years of success and whose business models were seen as innovative and futuristic have found it difficult to survive. The long period of living restrictions meant that families spent more time together and had limited choice as the global supply chain collapsed. This resulted in opportunities for local players to establish a relationship with customers. As big brands struggled to reach their customers, the customers fo

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und reliability in the otherwise ignored local players. The challenge is, some of these shifts in consumer behaviour may continue much beyond the pandemic and become stable marketing trends. The shifts in consumer behaviour have not only created challenges but also led to demand for new products and services. Strategies that made brands profitable may no longer contribute to the bottom lines. Brands need to be agile and innovate in their operations as well as marketing campaigns to win back consumer confidence. Marketers need to assess their tone of communication and reassess their media strategies to reach consumers with an offer that delivers on the attributes that consumers have learnt to value during this crisis. Consumers may have changed certain aspects of their lives due to this pandemic, but some consumers have found benefits associated with these changes and may continue to display these behaviour patterns even beyond the pandemic. Brands should be able to respect these changes and adopt their strategies to deliver better value to their target market.

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