Scientific Research Publishing

Commercial Organizations' Use of Social Marketing (Advertising) to Foster Sustainable Relations with Consumers through the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores commercial organizations' role in social marketing (advertising) for sustainable relations with consumers during COVID-19 era. Three research questions are sought: how should brands advertise products or services during COVID-19; what are the marketing strategies that consumers deem valuable in creating relations that can lead to profit generation after COVID-19era; what is the impact of advertising social marketing purpose-inspired actions? **Design/Methodology/Approach:** This qualitative study holds an exploratory purpose of examining consumers' opinions towards brands' social marketing behaviors. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with middle-class-income consumers during January 2021 (cross-sectional study). Thematic analysis is used to identify rational conclusions. **Findings:** Through thematic analysis, it is found that: changes in consumers' choice of purchases, marketing strategy, and adoption of digital commerce were common during the COVID-19 era; ads that drew consumers in sought to make a positive impact and imprint new human values that matched the needs of society; online advertising reached consumers effortless; compassionate purpose driven and social advertising is deemed attractive in the era of COVID-19; brand honesty, accountability, and charity are effective to build brands at a time when people are increasingly choosing brands that align with their values; purpose driven or social marketing can signal to consumers to engage with a brand in myriad ways. **Originality/Value:** This study contributed to the literature, illustrating the prosperous strategies and practices that would navigate businesses lucratively during the pandemic to better satiate consumers' attention, support, purchase intents, and loyalty during COVID-19.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has touched and disturbed everyone's lives. According to Holz (2020), the pandemic caused a financial crisis in many countries, making citizens quarantine, practice social distancing, and prioritize their behaviors towards saving money. In this aspect, businesses have been subject to loss of sales, seeking substantial transformations in business practices (Gardner & Matviak, 2020). Isaac et al. (2020) explain that currently businesses are taking a commerce "*wait-and-see*" approach to the impact of COVID-19 on sales; nevertheless, it is harming business performances in the market (Ahmed et al., 2020). It is uncertain how consumers will react to brands after the pandemic passes, but marketing and advertising practices are still needed to gain consumers' encouragement and loyalty (Levit & Cismaru, 2020). Kotler (2020) urges that businesses should figure out the suitable approach to promote products and services effectively in the midst of COVID-19 among vulnerable consumers, as global research shows that advertising is facing losses (Vorhaus, 2020; Al Bara et al., 2021).

Based on the study by Ganesh (2020), it can be assumed that consumers may not have high disposable incomes; and they are highly cautious in using their existing disposable incomes. Verma and Naveen (2021) simulate those consumers may not decide or participate in impulse buying immediately after the COVID-19 era; they may decide to behave in a need-based planned shopping in the short term. However, in the long run, they may again shift to aspirational buying. Subsequently, scholars and practitioners have urged further research on how businesses can connect with consumers to gain their monetary and cognitive support during and after the pandemic (Ahmed et al., 2020). Due to insufficient research on how businesses are to advertise effectively thru COVID-19 era, there is a need to grasp how to approach attention-grabbing and thought-provoking campaigns that would achieve sustainable and long-term consumer sales, enhancement of brand image and brand equity (Sprinks et al., 2021). Based on past studies, businesses and brands need to reevaluate their current and future advertising and marketing campaigns to maintain a steady stream of income for sustainable operations in the market (Islam et al., 2020). Thus, this current study is considered academically important.

Scholars and practitioners exemplify that many businesses are using their budget that was supposedly for their advertising strategy to putting it in strategies unleashed to help people, society, and the planet thrive. In researches on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and COVID-19, it shows that companies are employing social marketing to promote both public health and their brands (Lee, 2020). Corporations opt for this type of marketing to fulfilling their CSR

and to maintain sales in the long run of business operations (Bhasin, 2020). Marketers, advertisers, and other partitioners are coming up with a variety of philanthropic ideas for steering and contributing different positive changes in social behaviors in various fields and industries (Bhasin, 2020). Social marketing aims to promote behaviors among people that can benefit society as well as the individual (Kotler, 2020). Social marketing aims to influence people to change their behaviors for the greater good; this is the main difference compared to commercial marketing, which aims to influence people to purchase a product or service (Deshpande, 2016). Social marketing is deemed a progressive phenomenon among businesses in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 era. Based on global statistics of Edelman's 2020 Trust Barometer, consumers are becoming belief-driven buyers, meaning they select/shift/avoid/refuse a brand based on its stand on societal issues (Deshpande, 2019). More insights into this marketing practice are considered practically important.

Since there is uncertainty about when the world would be free from the contagious virus, this study aims to explore commercial organizations' role in social advertising to foster sustainable relations with consumers in the COVID-19 and post COVID-19 era. The aim of this paper is to encourage more social marketing initiatives grounded in theory. Accordingly, three research questions are sought: how did brands advertise products or services during COVID-19; what are the marketing strategies that consumers deem valuable in creating relations that will lead to profit generation after the COVID-19; what is the impact of advertising social marketing purpose-inspired actions?

The remaining sections in this paper consist of the literature review (Section two), the research methods applied in the current study (Section three), the qualitative research results, themes and its explanation (Section four), and the research conclusion, discussions, implications, limitations and future research suggestions (Section five).

2. Literature Review

Kotler (2020) and Verma and Naveen (2021) show that there is a need to understand the current consumers' opinion towards marketing strategies during the pandemic, influencing consumers to support businesses post lockdown. The following paragraphs clarify the literature on social marketing recognition during COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 era.

2.1. Social Marketing

Kotler and Zaltman (1971) published an article, "*Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change*", and since then, social marketing has been gaining prevalence in different fields of marketing, business, and social administration (Deshpande, 2019). Businesses use social marketing as an approach to building a positive brand reputation and sales, aiding positive changes in communities for public interest—the well-being of society (Chauhan et al., 2020; Lee, 2020).

"*Social marketing applies commercial marketing technologies to motivate voluntary social behavior*" (LaBarge, 2020). Social Marketing stimulates significant ideas that boost constructive values, attitudes, manners, feelings, and behaviors (Kotler & Keller, 2021). Ideas that can be promoted by businesses are numerous, such as social issues, environmental issues, political issues, etc. Many businesses thru COVID-19, instead of using commercialized ads, promoted positive behaviors that aided society in controlling the spread of the virus (Kotler, 2020).

During community distress, Hitesh Bhasin (2020) found that 50% of men and 60% of women engage in social change via money, services and goods donations; 80 out of 100 participants think that they can make the world a better place through their actions; more than 70% of the participants prefer to assist other people that are not as much fortunate as they are; more than 85% of the participants respect companies that place a budget to help the well-being of society. Many other global studies show similar evident statistics, confirming how social marketing is gaining significant prevalence around the world; it allows stakeholders to give back in a positive manner to society (Kotler, 2020; Lee, 2020). Thus, consumers seek to support companies that become good corporate citizens, supporting those who need help (Riano & Yakovleva, 2019).

2.1.1. Corporate Citizenship

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2000) states that businesses should: "*behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce, their families as well as of the local community and society at large*" (p.10). CSR is not an optional practice done by businesses now but is a core activity (Riano & Yakovleva, 2019). Researches show that CSR produces a variety of organizational benefits; for example, is plays a vital role in brand performance in a volatile business environment, builds strong support of networks, and forms trust among different stakeholders (consumers, employees, suppliers, communities, nongovernmental organizations, government agencies, etc.). CSR has the power to increase brand reputation, to generate greater consumer value and brand loyalty (Hansen et al., 2011). Businesses as corporate citizens are to support "*protection, facilitation and enabling of citizens' rights—formerly an expectation placed solely on governments*" (Matten & Crane, 2005). Matten and Crane (2005) clarify businesses should aid in awareness and contribution towards: "*social rights of access to education, health care, and welfare services, enabling civil rights such as freedom from abuses and rights to own property and exercise freedom of speech and engage in free markets, and channeling political rights of participating in societal matters through rights to vote, hold, and participate in collective and public institutions*" (p. 174). These deeds can be achieved and promoted by marketing strategies, such as advertising (Lee, 2020).

2.1.2. Social Advertising

Research shows that effective ads are those that are able to magnetize consumers'

attention with powerful words, eye-catching models and celebrities, hedonic elements, illustration of attractive social images, or other ideas of self-indulgence through either traditional or nontraditional media; commercial advertising seeks to influence purchasing decisions for financial gain (Belch and Belch, 2021). However, when COVID-19 hit the world, advertising negatively became impacted. An average of $26 billion in advertising revenue was lost due to COVID-19 (Vorhaus, 2020). Basil (2019) states that during times of distress and turmoil faced by a community, it is mandatory for companies to show their support. So, social advertising as a social marketing approach is deemed an effective tool for publicizing a brand (Kirk et al., 2021), enhancing brand reputation with communities and consumers (Basil, 2019). Commercial advertising and social advertising differ fundamentally in their purpose. Social advertising as a marketing effort seek to influence consumer behavior for the good of community or society not just for the company profits (LaBarge, 2020). Communicating social driven ideas help brands to react more professionally to growing public scrutiny (Lee, 2020). Research during COVID-19 era show that advertising that illustrate social actions rather than commercial based motives, increased consumers attention, support, and loyalty (Chauhan et al., 2020).

2.1.3. Social Marketing during COVID-19

Balis's (2020) research states that during crises like COVID-19 spread, people feel vulnerable; empathy becomes critical to be stimulated. Correspondingly, people will remember brands for their acts of good in a time of hardship and catastrophe, particularly if done with true heart and generosity. Social responsibility as a marketing practice is significant. Social marketing is paramount for brands as it develops good brand awareness among consumers and potential consumers and other individuals in society. Social marketing aid in promoting good health precautions and influence people to adopt a safe and healthier lifestyle. It lets people recognize the necessary behavioral changes for society. Social endorsing can quickly achieve great outcomes.

Hitesh Bhasin's (2020) research explains that social marketing plays a significant role in allowing consumers to develop a bond with the brand and to support the brand in the good deeds that it participates in. During times of turmoil, focusing on commercialization is shortened as every business has to deal with social marketing to let people know their role in changing society for the better. Social marketing can allow businesses to be successful in developing a widespread presence in society. The research further elaborates that social marketing is significant communication; if a brand knows what social change citizens are looking for, brands can promote it to quickly gain consumers' attention and support.

Kotler's (2020) research explains that many companies that are developing commercials see that it is trivial to promote buying a specific product due to a self-indulgent social image in a time of unrest (this tactic was applicable before the pandemic). The research further clarifies that the pandemic caused a catas-

trophe, recession, and despair among the people in the market and has changed consumer behavior and consumer priorities when it comes to consumption and purchases. The research continues to elaborate that the consumers that are going through the pandemic have changed their mindset, which might be long-lasting even after the situation eases.

Lee's (2020) research clarifies that in order to gain consumer relations, support and future sales, companies should show their citizenship. Companies should play a role in taking action towards society and working on promoting the needed behaviors to tame the pandemic and ease people's feelings of discomfort. Various campaigns for social marketing can quickly develop an interest in the public. Advertising during the COVID-19 era is recommended to serve a social cause.

2.2. Theories Outlining Social Marketing

While social marketers draw primarily on commercial marketing strategies, social marketing applies a pragmatic philosophy that is not limited to a single theory, approach, academic discipline, or a single world view (Kotler, 2020). Several theories and models for social marketing exist in literature; however, with little formal insights regarding "*which types of models for what types of social problems in what kinds of situations are most appropriate*" (Lefebvre, 2000). The effectiveness of attracting consumers to support and become devoted to brands with the use of social marketing has been explained by many theories that exist in the literature (Basil, 2019). Theories come from scientific methods and rigorous testing through application to multiple contexts; it can significantly improve social marketing practice (Levit & Cismaru, 2020).

In describing social marketing, many scholars and researchers embrace the notion of exchange theory to link it to marketing practices (Kotler & Roberto, 1989). According to *exchange theory*, people are willing to pay the price for things that they believe have value (Basil, 2019). Kotler (2000) explains that there are several factors needed to sustain the exchange theory. First, each party, the consumers and the marketers should connect in context; each party should have something that has value to the other party; each party should be willing to deal with the other party; and finally, each party can communicate and deliver on their promises. According to Basil (2019), people "weigh" the costs of a particular choice against the benefits and then react. Usually, if the benefits are more than the costs, consumers are likely to act to the marketers' claims—social marketers must demonstrate that the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs for the voluntary behavior to become attractive and necessary to oblige (Kotler, 2020).

Other academics on the subject of social marketing neglect to mention the exchange theory in their classification and explanation of social marketing. This is made clear in Kotler and Roberto's (1989) review of the exchange concept in social marketing. Thus, to clarify this confusion are other authors who apply the

social marketing theory (Tomes, 1994). *Social marketing theory* is a mass communication theory that fosters socially valuable information and encourages socially accepted behaviors (Bajracharya, 2018). Based on the theory, social marketing integrates marketing ideas, philosophies, methods, techniques and socially beneficial concepts to promote communication and benefit society (Basil, 2019). The theory has been used by social and welfare organizations to help promote or discourage various behaviors; now it is used by commercial brands (Chauhan et al., 2020). The theory tries to clarify how societal and psychological factors (obstacles and/or opportunities) work to successfully influence consumers and society with the flow of mass media (Lefebvre, 2000). The theory of social marketing is to be successful if consumers develop an awareness of the campaign. According to the theory, it is necessary to reinforce the message by repeatedly ensuring that individuals are exposed to the message from different channels (Kotler & Roberto, 1989; Basil, 2019). In such a situation, image advertising is used and deemed significant in capturing attention and creating a strong image in the audiences' minds. Visual advertisements help create a favorable setting for promoting the social message and making people request to know more (Levit & Cismaru, 2020).

The current literature shows several marketing initiatives during the COVID-19, discussing what previous research revealed about how companies can adapt their marketing practices in times of crisis and the effects of the unprecedented disruption caused by COVID-19 on immediate and long-term consumer behavior. Further research is needed to elaborate on the consequences of this disruption for marketing strategies and marketing policies to fill in the gap in the literature. Further studies are needed to clarify how current marketing and advertising should be carried out during economic downturns that can effectively impact consumer relations with the brand (Hoekstra & Leeflang, 2020). Thus, this research aims to know "what" consumers think and "why" they think so about the role of commercial organizations in developing effective advertising during COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 era. It seeks the recognition of social advertising to attract and develop sustainable long-term relations with consumers during the post-COVID-19 era. The focus is on the discovery of ideas and insights to support existing theories.

3. Research Methodology

Data were collected during January 2021, making this cross-sectional study research. This qualitative study holds an exploratory purpose, clarifying concepts and forming assumptions to recommend social marketing campaigns as an effective tool for retaining consumers; the insights help map social marketing theory literature, past research, and practical illustrations.

Egypt, specifically Cairo and Alexandria, is the region of focus in this study as it is known to be an attractive consumer market of high potential profit for multinationals of various fields; these cities hold the most retail stores and malls that

sell global commercial brands (Fathy, 2019). This study's population is middle-income consumers as Euromonitor International (2019) explains that they are large size consumer segment and hold discretionary spending power; they're the primary target of consumer-focused businesses. These consumers: "*focus on family, plan ahead for the future and place importance on their image. They are increasingly health-aware and eco-friendly whilst also choosing convenience in almost all aspects of life. These values and attitudes influence their purchasing decisions*" (p.1). Egypt's Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (2019) clarify middle-class consumers make between EGP 4000 to 7000 (US$ 235 - 411) as monthly income. According to McKinsey and Company (2021), middle income consumers are less optimistic about COVID-19 and are particular spending less. European Commission (2021) indicates that during COVID-19: "*38% of consumers were concerned about being able to pay bills; another 42% decided to postpone major purchasing decisions. On a positive note, findings show that 56% of consumers are mindful of the environmental impact of their purchases*" (p.1).

The middle-income consumers are questioned through face-to-face semi-structured interviews to explore three research questions: how should brands advertise products or services during COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 era; what are the marketing strategies that consumers deem valuable in creating relations that will lead to profit generation after the COVID-19 era; what is the impact of advertising social marketing purpose-inspired actions? This research seeks conversational data collection so to provide opportunities to get in-depth detailed consumers' stories; to provide comprehensive insight regarding consumers' personal attitudes, opinions, experiences, and behaviors towards existing adverting, marketing practices, and shopping intentions during the COVID-19 era. An interview guide- a list of the covered topics and questions in the interview—is used to pinpoint necessary data needed to be gained (which went a pilot test of 5 interviews to confirm its accuracy). If more information is needed during the interviews, follow-up questions are added.

Non-probability purposive sampling is used to select consumers in this study; it reflects subjective sampling, having the researchers rely on their personal judgment of who should participate in the study from the population. The researchers approach the consumers at various malls to ask them for their participation. Those who agree are taken to a location nearby that is set specifically for the interview conduction. The interviewees needed to sign a consent form before participation to maintain research ethical matters. This qualitative research does not attempt to get representative samples as the depth of the interviews employed restricts the focus to a few individuals.

4. Research Findings

20 interviews are conducted, meeting *saturation level*—no new insights emerge during discussions. The redundancy of the consumers' comments signaled to the

researcher that the data collection could be concluded. The interviews are recorded and transcribed into writing for the conduction of *thematic analysis*; this analysis identifies central rational and logical themes, reflecting concepts or explanations applied to the research topic. Table 1 shows this study's participants.

Table 1. The interviewees' socio-demographic background.

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Marital-Status	City	Occupation
1. Participant (A)	31	Female	Married	Cairo	University
2. Participant (B)	48	Female	Married	Cairo	Teacher
3. Participant (C)	50	Male	Divorced	Alexandria	Accountant
4. Participant (D)	37	Female	Married	Alexandria	Housewife
5. Participant (E)	35	Female	Single	Alexandria	Administration
6. Participant (F)	32	Male	Single	Cairo	Media-Agency
7. Participant (G)	28	Male	Single	Alexandria	Sales rep
8. Participant (H)	30	Female	Married	Alexandria	University
9. Participant (I)	32	Female	Married	Alexandria	University
10. Participant (J)	27	Female	Single	Cairo	MNC
11. Participant (K)	29	Female	Single	Cairo	Student
12. Participant (L)	52	Female	Divorced	Alexandria	College Dean
13. Participant (M)	35	Female	Married	Alexandria	MNC
14. Participant (N)	42	Male	Married	Cairo	MNC
15. Participant (O)	38	Female	Single	Cairo	Accountant
16. Participant (P)	30	Female	Divorced	Cairo	Banker
17. Participant (Q)	32	Male	Widowed	Cairo	Trader
18. Participant (R)	27	Female	Married	Alexandria	Media-agency
19. Participant (S)	35	Male	Married	Cairo	Medical Doctor
20. Participant (T)	37	Male	Married	Cairo	Medical Doctor

Source: the current interviews' discussion.

Research Question 1:

How did brands advertise products or services during the COVID-19 era?
Three questions were asked to assess this research question, resulting in several themes to be concluded. These questions were: (Q1) *how did your purchasing behavior change during the COVID-19 era?* (Q2) *Can you recall specific advertisements that you watched during the COVID-19 period? What was the impact of this ad on you* (*became aware of the product, became more knowledgeable, developed more interest in the product, etc.*)? (Q3) *Where did you watch these ads* (*online, TV, print, etc.*)?

Based on the discussions for **question one**, consumer buying behavior did

change when COVID-19 hit the world at the beginning of 2020. Many people reduced spending on brands that were for lavishness (or purchasing extra products that were unnecessary). The focus was on priority groceries and shopping goods that were mandatory to purchase. The spending behavior decreased as people's had a fear of the unknown consequences of the pandemic. The fear progressed greatly as the citizens witnessed a major downfall in the global economy as well as a high level of unemployment: "*I am a teacher and I sometimes give private lessons after school. These lessons stopped as parents were scared to bring an outsider with the chance of holding the virus to their home*" (Participant-**B**); "*My salary was delayed for a couple of months. So, some months I didn't get my salary*" (Participant-**F**); "*I worked remotely and this was something new, I was scared that maybe they might then downsize and reduce employment if the business is slow*" (Participant-**B**).

The discussion illustrated that most of their purchases were made online when they were forced to stay home due to the country being closed down. Many participants explained that now as shopping online has become a popular habit, they would seek to purchase brands that were not necessarily their first choice in physical stores. One participant clarified that: "*shopping digitally opened consumer eyes to a wide variety of products that are cost-effective and/ or of quality*" (Participant-**A**).

It was clear during the discussion, due to limited purchasing power and due to online purchases, the brands encouraged consumers to spend more conservatively; and this was a "*significant marketing to gain consumer value*" (Participant-**H**). Brand deemed attractive to the interviewees with promotions like "Buy One, Get One Free"; or marketing messages that focus on sustainability; or marketing messages that show importance of the product in the pandemic; or marketing messages that show humanistic deeds. The first theme emerged: *Changes in consumers' choice of purchases, marketing strategy, and adoption of digital commerce are common during the COVID-19 era.*

Based on the discussions for questions two and three, consumers are noticing that advertising and brands are responding to the crisis in a variety of ways. Some brands and their advertising are supporting the World Health Organization, promoting the right behaviors needed by citizens to control the spread of the pandemic, such as stay home, washing your hands, or maintaining social distances. Most interviewees mentioned "*MBC satellite channels, Vodafone, Nike, and Dettol*" as the brands that promoted empathetic advertising that was affectionate and comforting. The interviewees were impressed that brands began to use their advertising efforts to focus on humanistic and empathetic values in the designing of the advertising campaigns to promote the reputation of the institutions and the advancement of society. On the other extreme, the interviewees mentioned that some brands and their advertising remained unchanged and indifferent to the pandemic and are continuing their business and advertising strategies as usual.

The interviewees mentioned that some brands did not change their advertising content to be supportive of the pandemic, leading them to develop a negative image of the brand: For example, the interviewees mentioned: "19,011 *pharmacy ads had older generation singers dancing and singing; they played the nostalgia-card, but the idea is old and irrelevant, especially for a pharmacy in the COVID-19 era*" (Participant-**A**). "*I did not like the WE commercial* (يو_لسة_اكتر#) *even though the commercial was relevant and made perfect sense for quarantine; it illustrated to people to start partying at home, neglecting that people were anxious at home than the feelong of content. They were not like Vodafone, bringing the biggest Egyptian celebrities* (*Mohamed Salah, Mona Zaki, Essaad Younes*) *to encourage us to be strong in coping with the coronavirus*" (Participant-**H**). The second theme emerged: Ads that drew consumers in sought to make a positive impact and imprint new human values that matched the needs of society.

Most of the interviewees indicated that when staying at home during the COVID-19 era, their social media consumption increased, making purchasing online a simple and convenient process for shopping and home delivery. An interviewee states that "*social media made shopping not only readily available and affordable, but contact-free*". The interviewees indicated that as they go online, whether to shop or communicate or get entertained, they would come across advertisements. Thus, the third theme emerged: online advertising reached consumers effortlessly.

Research Question 2:

What are the marketing strategies that consumers deem valuable in creating relations that will lead to profit generation after the COIVD-19 era?
Two questions were asked to assess this research question, resulting in the main themes being concluded. These questions were: (Q1) *Do you think it is important for brands to advertise humanitarian ideas and attributes to society?* (*Q*2) *What are the vital social and humanitarian aspects you think advertisers should consider when promoting their products and services?*

During question one, the interviewees clarified that it is vital for brands to advertise humanitarian ideas to society. The essence of commercial brands' participation in purpose driven marketing and advertising initiatives is not the achievement of the cause itself, but the achievement of marketing goals: gaining consumer support. The interviewees stated that if they were not thinking of purchasing a brand in the current scenario, if that brand was to illustrate compassion and philanthropical acts, they would purchase the brand in upcoming time. They believed that humanitarian ideas/attributes to society illustrated in advertising is an effective promotional activity of an organization in their eye; it would attract them to the brand as it demonstrates their corporate citizenship and willing to endorse and support a societal or charitable cause.

Interviewees claimed that: "*when a company creates ads as a vehicle of communication of CSR, it displays to the audience how the brand is devoted to social responsibility and seeks to create specific benefits for society*" (Participant-**F**). "*It*

is important that business try to show empathy to the people and support them during their turmoil; it is necessary and feasible for-profit organizations to promote a cause/purpose without commercial objectives" (Participant-**C**). "*If I know a brand is supporting a cause, I might buy the brand, not for the product itself but for wanting to support the purpose driven behavior*" (Participant-**H**). So, the fourth theme: Compassionate purpose driven and social advertising is deemed attractive in the era of COVID-19.

Based on the discussions for question two, the interviewees clarified the vital social and humanitarian aspects that marketers and advertisers should consider when promoting their products and services, which illustrates their brand honesty, accountability, and charity work. They assumed that compassion and ethics among marketers are important because by acting uprightly with their advertising and marketing strategies, a company is being responsible for the needs of the customer during the era of COVID-19. The majority of the discussions show that purpose-driven ads aid brands in deeply connecting with consumers. The findings show that humanity, kindness, and generosity work can translate into doing well for the brand's overall image.

Some supporting quotes are: "*Companies should be accountable to the community, being responsible for when things go wrong. This is an admirable trait in brands*" (Participant-**F**). "*Companies can demonstrate their commitment to ethics through charity work*" (Participant-**H**). "*Charity encapsulates what a company values and holds dear, and so consumers support the business because of that value, which is congruent and relevant to them*" (Participant-**N**). "*Brands should be compassionate, understanding the pain citizens are facing and having the desire to somehow lessen that pain*" (Participant-**A**). "*It is an attractive trait when brands show empathy during COIVD-19 vicariously, as if they experienced that pain themselves*" (Participant-**E**). This concluded the fifth Theme: Brand honesty, accountability, and charity are effective to build brands at a time when people are increasingly choosing brands that align with their values.

Research Question 3:

What are the impacts of advertising that illustrate social marketing purpose-inspired actions? Two questions were asked to assess this research question, resulting in themes to be concluded. These questions were: 1) *When commercial business partakes in social marketing, how do you perceive them*? 2) *Which brand do you believe has attractive social advertising*?

Based on the discussions for question one, the interviewees clarified that when evaluating brands that participate in purpose driven or social marketing initiatives, they have strong brand associations and images that reflect: "*responsible, compassionate, ethical, inclusive.*" So, purpose driven or social marketing sticks in consumers' minds in a way with principled and humanitarian words rather than functional attributes (convenient, affordable, practical). "*I am likely to remember a company with a strong purpose that is philanthropic during COVID-19 era, developing future brand purchasing when needing their product or service*" (Participant-**N**). The discussions illustrate that companies that promote their

charity works can motivate consumers' behaviors that are desired by brands, including deciding which brands to trust, purchase, and be loyal to. "*People will remember those empathetic brands willing to give away their content/product/service during times of uncertainty*" (Participant-**A**). The sixth theme that emerged: Purpose driven or social marketing can signal to consumers to engage with a brand in myriad ways.

Based on the discussion with the interviewees to question two, the interviewees elaborated that during uncertain times when the economy is shaky and people are frightened of losing their jobs, they don't need a heavy sales pitch; it would be inappropriate and irrelevant to the current market circumstances and the situations in which many citizens are facing. The interviews explained that as part of a company's corporate social responsibility, they have to be good citizens and support a community in times of need rather than just thinking about making profit, especially if a brand is a multinational company. "*Brands need to be extra sensitive to how customers might be feeling during the COVID-19 era. Brands should not be manipulative or incisive on consumers to buy something. Brands need to help consumers make the right decision, and that might mean not buying their product or service right now*" (Participant-**I**).

The final theme that emerged clarifies that: brands that practice compassionate marketing are able to develop consumer trust and relations, forming prospect sales after the crisis. When asked which brand exemplified this concept, the cases were:

- **Dove:** during the beginning of the pandemic, Dove created social media campaigns (with a compassionate, user-generated content campaign) that encouraged people to stay at home.
- **Dettol:** Dettol created encouraging advertising people to wash their hands with soap regardless of the brand just wash
- **Burger King:** Burger King in the UK did a compassionate purpose driven campaign, providing a generous financial benefit to independent restaurants forced to close during the coronavirus lockdown.
- **Nike:** Nike created a viral ad communicating to people not to give up on sports and they should have perseverance at a time when organized sports have been shut down by the coronavirus pandemic.
- **Pepsi:** PepsiCo donated a large sum of money globally to bring food and other vital resources to the most affected communities due to the lockdown.

Based on the above presented interviews' narrative analysis,the researchers thought to make sense of the interview regarding the respondents' individual discussion on their experience, opinions, attitudes, and personal stories related to marketing campaigns that were witnessed by commercial brands during the COVID-19 era. The above analysis highlights the important aspects of their stories that should be resonated with scholars and practitioners. Various themes emerged in the analysis and are summarized in Table 2. These insights are constructive as it highlights critical points that are sufficient and needed in the literature. These insights lead to areas that have scope for further research. In addi-

tion, these insights provide practical direction,illustrating the prosperous strategies and practices that would navigate businesses lucratively during the pandemic to better satiate consumers' attentions, support, purchase intents, and loyalty during COVID-19.

Table 2. The emerged interview themes.

Interview Themes	Main conclusions of the interviewees' accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and/or experiences that the researchers see as relevant to the research question.
Theme One	Changes in consumers' choice of purchases, marketing strategy, and adoption of digital commerce are common during COVID-19 era.
Theme Two	Ads that drew consumers in sought to make a positive impact and imprint new human values that matched the needs of society.
Theme Three	Online advertising reached consumers effortless.
Theme Four	Compassionate purpose driven and social advertising is deemed attractive in the era of COVID-19
Theme Five	Brand honesty, accountability, and charity are effective to build brands and their relations with consumers at a time when people are increasingly choosing brands that align with their values.
Theme Six	Purpose driven or social marketing can signal to consumers to engage with a brand in myriad ways.

Source: the current research.

5. Research Conclusion

When COVID-19 hit the world, many business and marketing strategies and models needed to be modified. Businesses, marketers, and advertisers were challenged during this period, thinking through different and new strategies and practices that would navigate the business lucratively during the pandemic (Kotler, 2020). Scholars and practitioners assumed to address this challenge through practices related to sustainability. Research and empirical evidence were needed for further clarification (Lee, 2020; Kim, 2020). Thus, this study sought to contribute to empirical evidence by exploring commercial organizations' role in social advertising to foster sustainable relations with consumers in the COVID-19 era. The study established that during this time, businesses refocused on social marketing to better satiate consumers' attentions, support, and purchase intentions. These practices, in the eyes of consumers, were powerful and prevailed for businesses in creating inspired strategic marketing campaigns and targeted advertising, facing the challenges of consumer purchase decline; building their reputation as wholesome corporate citizens, and using social media effectively.

5.1. Managerial and Theoretical Implication

The findings of this study have been supported by past studies, adding further

forethought to the literature. This study implies: *changes in consumers' choice of purchases, marketing strategy, and adoption of digital commerce are common during the COVID-19 era.* Kotler (2020) illustrates that consumers are reorganizing their priorities toward products and various matters in life. According to Holz (2020), the pandemic caused a financial crisis in countries, making citizens prioritize their behaviors towards saving money due to their fear of unemployment chances. Lane (2020) finds that consumer behavior positively increased towards essential goods for survival rather than luxury and leisure products.

This study implies: *ads that drew consumers in sought to make a positive impact and imprint new human values that matched the needs of society.* This idea supports Anastasiu and Bigu (2018), claiming that it is important for advertisers to maintain the ethical framework and serve the community through raising social awareness that conforms with the objectives of the brand and achieves the awareness dimension of the target consumer. Yehia (2019) and Kotler (2020) state that philanthropical and public-spirited advertisements impact brand reputation positively among consumers, increasing consumer collaboration with the brand. Gber (2019) explains that social, cultural, environmental and personal values are powerful content in inspiring consumers to view a brand optimistically. Finally, Shazly and Mahrous (2020) state that social campaign affects consumers' attitudes towards firms and intention to purchase.

This study implies: *online advertising reaches consumers effortlessly.* This finding is supported by global reports. For example, GLG (2020) clarifies that the COVID-19 pandemic seems ideally suited for social media's unparalleled ability to offer mass instantaneous communication. The pandemic gave rise to Facebook, Instagram and gave power to Google to reach people anywhere and anytime. Social media dominance in impact is due to the platform's causation, precision, flexibility, and accountability (Kotelr & Armstrong, 2018).

This study implies: *Compassionate purpose driven and social advertising is deemed attractive in the era of COVID-19.* This conclusion supports the findings of Sheehy and Farneti (2021). They show that social marketing and cause-related marketing is significant among business as it has become mandatory for the core commercial interests of the company. Sprinks et al. (2021) show that businesses partaking in humanitarian activities achieve both their short-term goals, for example, an immediate rise in sales, and their more long-term goals, such as the enhancement of a corporation's image or brand equity based on increased brand awareness, brand likability, favorable brand associations, or bonding of customers to a corporation or a brand.

This study implies: *brand honesty, accountability, and charity are effective in building brands at a time when people are increasingly choosing brands that align with their values.* Past research shows that charity or social work is a tool for improving business image, enhancing the goodwill among consumers (Kotler, 2020). Charitable giving by a business to a community can change con-

sumers perception—"*products and services of companies engaged in social activities are perceived as better in delivering the value to the customer*" (Chauhan et al., 2020). Gardberg et al. (2019) explain that social actions are convincing to alter consumers' product evaluations.

This study implies: *purpose driven or social marketing can signal to consumers to engage with a brand in myriad ways; brands that practice compassionate marketing are the ones that people trust most and the ones that form prospect sales after the crisis.* Sheehy and Farneti (2021) explain that businesses and brands use strategic philanthropy and corporate sponsorship to make a great impact on their image and reputation in the competitive market. Sprinks et al. (2021) show that it is common for for-profit organizations to promote a cause (social, environmental issues, etc.) without commercial objectives to gain a connection with the community and consumers. Kotler and Armstrong (2018) explain purpose driven marketing is beneficial in impacting and touching consumers—persuading target audience to either change behavior or to support the cause themselves; promoting philanthropical ideas and causes can lead to opportunities and prospect commercial interests of a company.

5.2. This Study Support Prior Theories

In this study, several themes emerged that act as empirical evidence, supportive of existing literature and the theory of exchange and the social marketing theory. Based on the theories in the literature and the discussions during the interviews, consumers have become attracted to brands that implement humanitarian acts; thus, purpose-driven marketing boomed as a strategy used by organizations to center its external communications efforts around a social cause that aligns with its core values. The interviews illuminated the concept and theory of purpose driven marketing, developing the following themes: (Theme 2) ads that drew consumers in sought to make a positive impact and imprint new human values that matched the needs of society; (Theme 6) purpose driven or social marketing can signal to consumers to engage with a brand in myriad ways.

According to exchange theory, people are goal oriented. For people to take notice and action towards an advertisement, they weight the benefits and risks of social-relationship. The interviews clarified the exchange theory, developing the following themes: (Theme 4) compassionate purpose driven and social advertising is deemed attractive in the era of COVID-19; (Theme 5); brand honesty, accountability, and charity are effective in building brands at a time when people are increasingly choosing brands that align with their values; (Theme 6) brands that practice compassionate marketing are the ones that people trust most, and the ones that form prospect sales after the crisis.

According to the social marketing theory, various media communication is necessary to promote socially valuable information and socially accepted behaviors that benefit society. Social Marketing Theory is a framework that is helpful in planning, designing, implementing and evaluating social campaigns with information sharing as its major objective. Information is packaged and distri-

buted following a plan so that maximum sharing and outcome is possible. The interviews clarified the social marketing theory, developing the following themes: (Theme 1) changes in consumers' choice of purchases, marketing strategy, and adoption of digital commerce are common during the COVID-19 era; (Theme 3) online advertising reached consumers effortlessly.

5.3. Research Recommendations

This study shows that brands need to show their human side, sharing positive, responsible, and compassionate marketing as an empathetic approach to creating brand credibility so as to win over consumers' attention, support, purchase intentions, and loyalty. This study's empirical evidence explains that taking care of consumers is a clever and prosperous business practice during the COVID-19 era, the year 2021 and beyond. The empirical evidence illustrates it is significant for businesses to empathize. Therefore, this study developed several recommendations that can be beneficial for marketers and advertisers to implement. When marketing a business for the aim of sustainability in performance in the market, the business should acknowledge the crisis and consumers' increased anxiety at this time. This can be accomplished through adjusting the marketing campaign, and evaluating the content, message, and imagery used in advertisements and marketing materials. This study suggests that marketers and advertisers employ mindful marketing and be empathetic to consumers. They should come up and use advertising ideas that support the social and intrinsic values of citizens. Businesses have certain responsibilities towards the society in which they operate. Therefore, it is recommended that they illustrate their positive roles and actions in community support and development (publicize the outcomes of their humanitarian work). This can be done through advertising campaigns. Ads should illustrate brand honesty, accountability, and charity. Doing so will allow practitioners to achieve a positive brand image and reputation.

5.4. Research Limitations

This study faced several limitations when conducting the investigation. This study was carried out in Cairo and Alexandria in January 2021revealed the sentiments of this consumer segment through a qualitative research approach. Fourteen interviews were conducted. Thus, due to the relatively small sample size, the results cannot be generalized to the entire nation. These are unprecedented times, and further studies are needed to identify the different opinions that can exist among other cities in Egypt or among other consumers in different countries. This proposed future knowledge can be beneficial as different consumer segments (geographic, demographic, or psychographic) embrace various feelings and behaviors due to the life changes caused by COVID-19. So, this knowledge can aid marketing managers in marketing and advertising their products and brands more effectively. This knowledge can be a good point of reference for managers of international brands to sustain their market share.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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