

Impact of COVID-19 on Consumer Behaviour and Mindful Consumption

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Abstract

This research significantly contributes to understanding the trends and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer buying patterns. The results, which are of utmost importance, highlight changes in consumer behavior that emerged at the beginning of the second wave of the pandemic. A questionnaire survey was conducted using an online panel to identify how consumers changed their shopping habits and the needs they prioritized pre and post-pandemic crises concerning their fears. The paper delves into the concept of mindful consumption pre- and post-COVID-19.

Keywords

COVID-19, Pandemic, Consumer Behavior, Mindful Behaviour, Mindful Consumption, Acquisitive Consumption, Repetitive Consumption

1. Introduction

The world witnessed a pandemic that changed how humans live, consume, think, and behave. COVID-19 has resulted in a disruption of lifestyle and consumer behavior. On March 11th, 2020, the coronavirus epidemic was declared a pandemic by the Director General of WHO (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). In the absence of a vaccine to curb the spread of the highly contagious virus COVID-19, countries around the world were forced to take preventive measures in the form of imposing social distancing and declaring country-wide lockdowns (Kaplan et al., 2020). Consumer sentiment varies significantly across countries impacted by COVID-19. Consumers in China, India, and Indonesia consistently report higher optimism than the rest of the world, while Europe and Japan remain less optimistic about their countries' economic conditions after COVID-19. Divergent sentiment is also reflected in spending intent across categories. Divergent senti-

ment is also reflected in spending intent across categories. In most countries, consumers intend to continue shifting their spending to essentials while cutting back on most discretionary categories (Charm et al., 2020).

Consumer behavior tended to compulsively focus on purchasing essential goods, especially those connected with preventing the virus, such as protective devices and sanitizing gel. The pandemic changed consumption patterns, for instance, reducing sales for some product categories (e.g., clothes) and improving sales for other categories (e.g., entertainment products) (Cannit et al., 2021). Also, research indicated that job insecurity and life uncertainty experienced during the pandemic negatively impacted consumer behavior (Degli Esposti et al., 2021).

The behavioral responses during epidemic outbreaks such as EBOLA, SARS, MERS, swine flu, and dengue have been studied in the past (Chirumbolo et al., 2021). The areas affected by pandemics generally witnessed unemployment, uncertainties, and economic recession. Food, face masks, and sanitizer purchases were increased during the swine flu outbreak (Balinska & Rizzo, 2009). During the first phase of the coronavirus lockdown in India, citizens experienced unprecedented situations, leading to an unparalleled preference shift among consumers. Unsurprisingly, in such an emergency, the need to buy necessities takes precedence (Goodwin et al., 2009). Since there is a colossal uncertainty in the world that brought about changes in how individuals consume, it is essential to understand how the consumption patterns of individuals have changed during COVID-19 and post-COVID-19. Thus, this study included both COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods.

Owing to the economic uncertainty due to the long period of lockdown in India that resulted in unemployment and financial instability, it is essential to find an answer to the impact of the pandemic on the consumption pattern of individuals. Thus, the paper intends to study the pre and post-COVID-19 consumer behavior and the major factors that drove consumers' purchase and investment decisions, & the reasons for the changes in behavior, if any. Secondly, considering the economic impact, would consumers continue impulse buying or shift towards mindful consumption?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Consumer Behaviour

Consumer Buyer behavior is influenced by four key sets of buyer characteristics: cultural, social, personal, and psychological. These factors can help identify interested buyers and shape products and appeals to serve consumer needs better (Kotler & Lee, 2008). Culture is the most critical determinant of a person's wants and behavior. Social Factors influence an individual's buying behavior. A person's reference group, social networks, family and friends, and professional associations strongly affect product and brand choices. Consumer Lifestyles, the whole pattern of acting and interacting in the world also influences purchase de-

cisions.

Consumer behavior studies individuals or groups searching to purchase, use, evaluate, and dispose of products and services to satisfy their needs (Larson & Shin, 2018). It also includes studying the consumer's emotional, mental, and behavioral responses that precede or follow these processes (Kardes et al., 2011). Changes in consumer behavior can occur for different reasons, including personal, economic, psychological, contextual, and social factors. However, in dramatic contexts such as a disease outbreak or a natural disaster, some elements, more than others, have a more significant impact on consumer behavior. Indeed, situations that potentially disrupt social lives or threaten individuals' health have been proven to lead to solid behavioral changes (Leach, 1994). An example is panic buying, a phenomenon occurring when fear and panic influence behavior, leading people to buy more things than usual (Lins & Aquino, 2020). Specifically, panic buying has been defined as a herd behavior that occurs when consumers buy a considerable amount of products in anticipation of, during, or after a disaster (Steven et al., 2014).

Pandemics and natural disasters are highly stressful situations, which can quickly induce negative emotions and adverse mental health states (Cannito et al., 2020; Sneath et al., 2009) such as perceived lack of control and instability, which are core aspects of emergencies, contribute directly to stress. Research has highlighted that stress is a crucial factor in influencing consumer behavior. For example, past studies have shown that individuals may withdraw and become passive in response to stress, and this inaction response can lead to a decrease in purchasing (Henry, 1993; Landau et al., 2011). However, some studies point out that stress can lead to an active response, increasing impulsive spending behaviours (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Duhachek, 2005). This study aims to understand whether the pandemic triggered impulsive spending or whether there were instances of mindful consumption, within the turmoil caused by COVID-19.

2.2. Mindful Consumption

The Concept of Mindfulness:

Mindful practice implies breaking from habitual scripts, breaking free from the conditioning of the mind, where individuals are more aware of internal and external stimuli to regulate their minds better to stay in the present moment. This enables individuals to make better and more informed decisions and choices, away from the habitual ways of making decisions (Milne et al., 2020).

Mindfulness is "a state of conscious awareness characterized by active distinction drawing that leaves the individual open to novelty and sensitive to context and perspective." Mindfulness has four main features: greater sensitivity to one's context or environment, more openness to new information, more excellent appetite for cognitive categorization, and enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem-solving (Sheth et al., 2011).

Mindful Consumption:

Mindful consumption is viewed as a process that requires consumers to pay attention to their bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts, with the attitude of acceptance as an ongoing process of inquiry to make consumption choices based on one's direct experience of needs, values, and insight (Bahl et al., 2016).

A core attribute that characterizes mindful consumption (MC) is mindset and behavior. For perspective, it is a sense of caring about the implications and consequences of one's consumption, and for behavior in MC, the core attribute is temperance in consumption. Sheth defines a mindful mindset as caring for nature, the self, and the community. Caring for oneself is not selfish or self-centered but is about paying heed to one's well-being. There are two main aspects of personal well-being: eudemonic—meaning happiness or flourishing, and economic. An increased level of consumption not only works counter to welfare in the eudemonic sense but also reduces economic well-being for vast segments of consumers. Caring for the natural environment is also a part of mindful consumption, wherein this view provides a motive to conserve the background so that it continues to remain helpful to humans.

A sense of caring for self, community, and nature would each motivate temperance in consumption. Their combined effect would give such motivation a more significant boost.

Mindful Behaviour:

Mindful consumption connotes temperance in acquisitive, repetitive, and aspirational consumption at the behavior level, ensuing from and reinforced by a mindset that reflects a sense of caring toward self, community, and nature. For behavior change, temperance is the pivotal concept in mindful consumption. Temperance does not imply a rejection of consumption per se, but temperance is about making consumption an ideal situation that provides ultimate satisfaction. Temperance must be exercised in three behaviors most often associated with overconsumption: accumulative, repetitive, and aspirational.

Acquisitive consumption: The most basic form of excessive consumption involves acquiring things at a scale that exceeds one's needs or even one's capacity to consume.

Repetitive consumption: The cycle of buying, discarding, and buying again is another path to excessive consumption. Many things are discarded and purchased repeatedly because they are meant to be consumed repeatedly.

Aspirational Consumption: Competitive consumption, as the name suggests, is related to a subtle variation of aspiration-driven consumption, and it is no longer limited to those at the top of the income pyramid (Sheth et al., 2011). Conspicuous consumption is not about people trying to keep up with their neighbors or even people of the same income status or those of similar socio-economic standing. Instead, the trend is an upward shift in consumer aspirations, coming with the vertical stretching out of reference groups—which means people are more likely to compare with others whose incomes are three, four, or five times one's own.

3. Objective of the Study & Methodology

This study aims to understand the impact of COVID-19 on consumer behavior, whether the sudden pandemic has brought about changes (if any) in individuals' consumption behavior, and the type of changes that have resulted in buying behavior owing to the crises. It will also examine the factors influencing purchase decisions and whether there were instances of impulse buying and mindful consumption when economic activities resumed post-lockdown.

Data was collected online through a structured questionnaire. Google Forms was used to create the questionnaire. The respondents had already experienced the lockdown and were also aware of the possible impact of this pandemic on the world's economy and its consequences on the Indian economy. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the first section comprised questions related to planned and unplanned purchases before and after the COVID-19 situation, The second section consisted of questions regarding impulse buying and mindful consumption, the last team comprised queries related to the demographic profile of the respondents; A 5-point Likert scale was used to get responses for some of the questions while some questions were open-ended to delve into the factors that influenced purchase decisions post lockdown.

Simple random sampling and convenience sampling were used to collect data, and the respondents were contacted by sending survey links through email and social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. A total of 43 responses were collected. 100 questionnaires were sent online, while only 43 responded accurately, filling the entire questionnaire. The number of respondents might be considered as a limitation of the study.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Expenditure Comparison Pre COVID & Post COVID (Figure 1 and Figure 2)

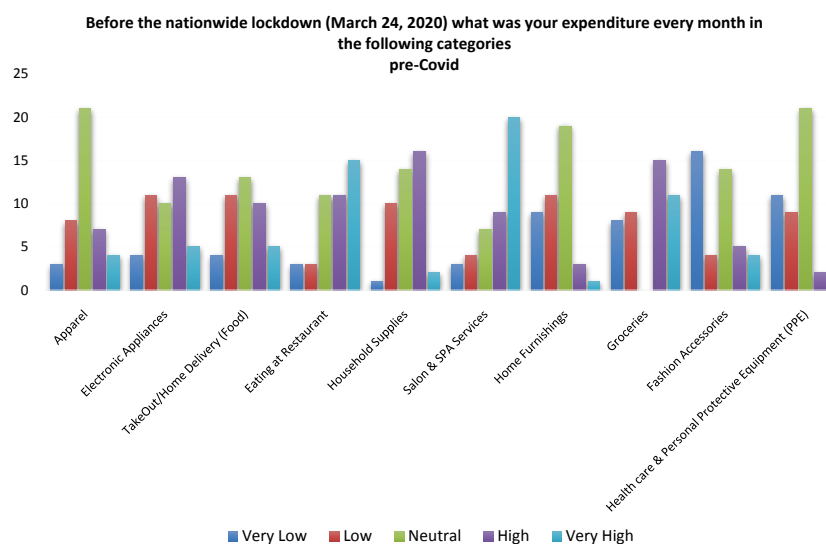


Figure 1. Expenditure of consumers pre-COVID-19.

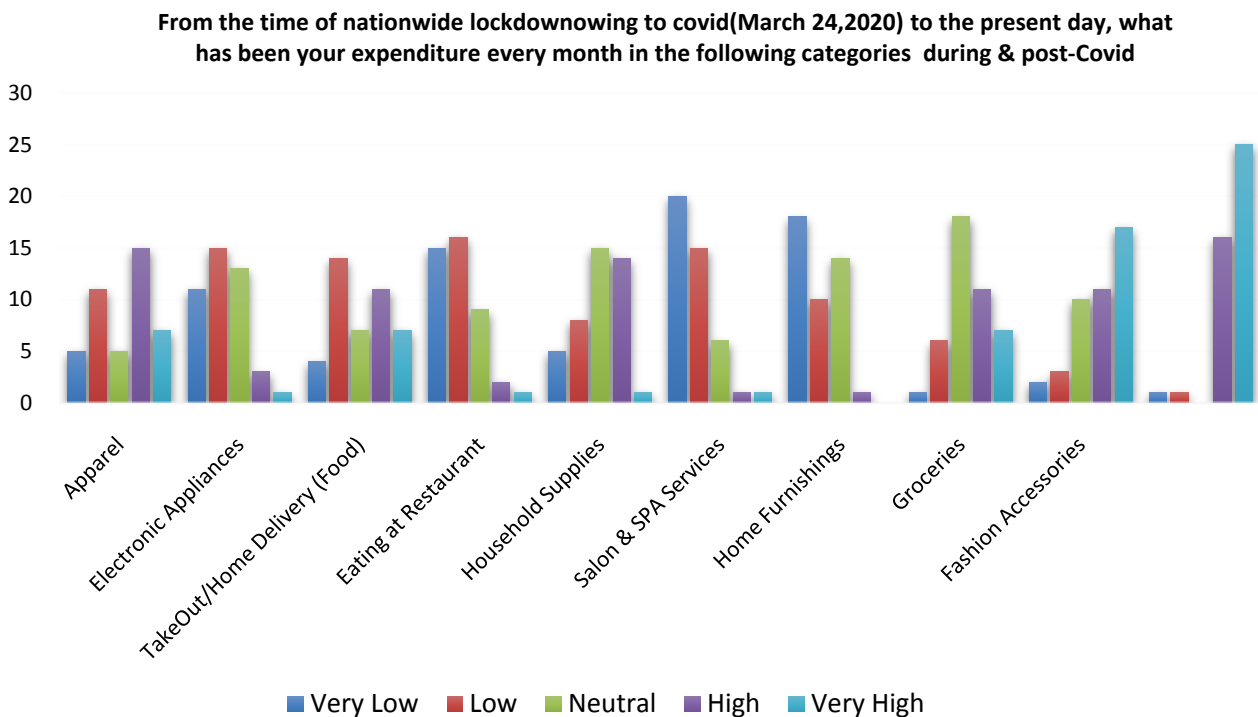


Figure 2. Expenditure of consumers during COVID-19.

Insights:

- There is a decrease in expenditure in every segment except for Food Delivery & Grocery.
- Eating at restaurants is the most impacted sector due to COVID-19, and consumers prefer home delivery.

4.2. Buying Behavior of Consumers Post COVID (Figure 3)

4. Do you have a habit of buying or changing /replacing the following items every 6 -12 month

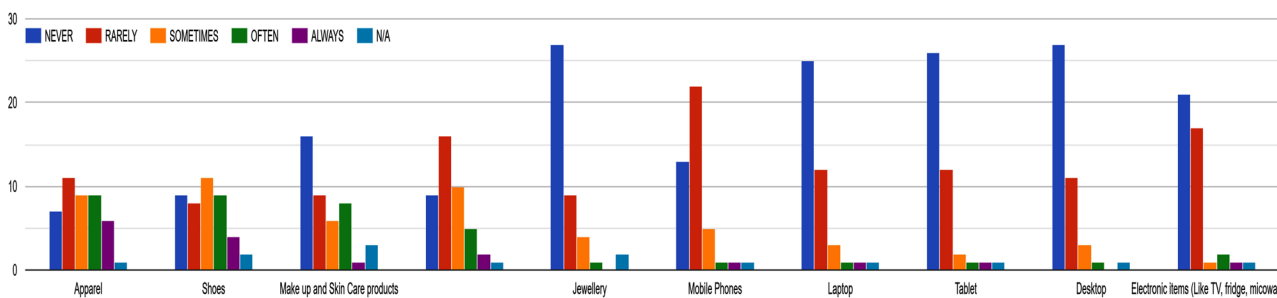


Figure 3. Post COVID-19 buying behaviour.

Insights:

- There is significant cost-cutting in skincare & makeup.
- Expenditure on healthcare & household supplies has been increased.

4.3. Consumer Preference towards Reusable Products (Figure 4)

7. Do you prefer to buy reusable products than disposable products?
43 responses

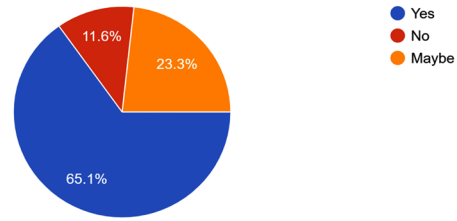


Figure 4. Preference of reusable products during COVID-19.

Insights:

- Almost 65% of people prefer reusable products to disposable ones.

4.4. Impact of Peer Influence on Consumer Buying Behavior (Figure 5)

9. Do you buy brands just because your friend / colleague /relative has bought the same brand or using a particular brand / product?
43 responses

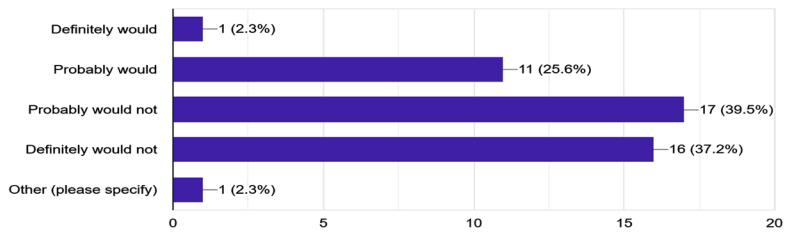


Figure 5. Influence of peer buying behaviour on consumers.

Insights:

- 28% of the survey respondents chose to buy the same brands as their peers/relatives.
- A notable 40% consumers demonstrated a strong preference for autonomy in their purchasing decisions, opting to buy brands of their own choice.

4.5. Change in Consumer Buying Behavior towards Electronics Pre COVID & Post COVID (Figure 6 and Figure 7)

10. Do you generally upgrade /buy an updated version of a product (like mobile phone/laptop/tablet/television/car/electronic item/... are using is functioning well without any problem?
43 responses

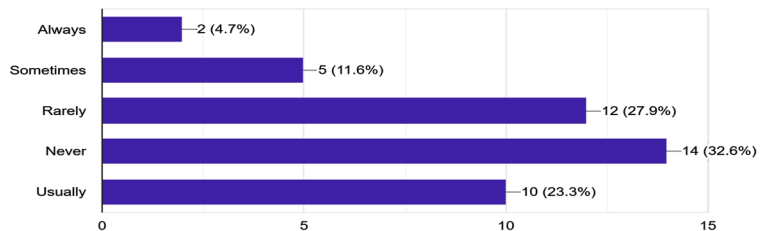


Figure 6. Repurchase of branded appliances.

11. From 24th March 2020, to the present day ,did you upgrade /buy an updated version of a product (like mobile phone/laptop/tablet/television...tly using is functioning well without any problem?

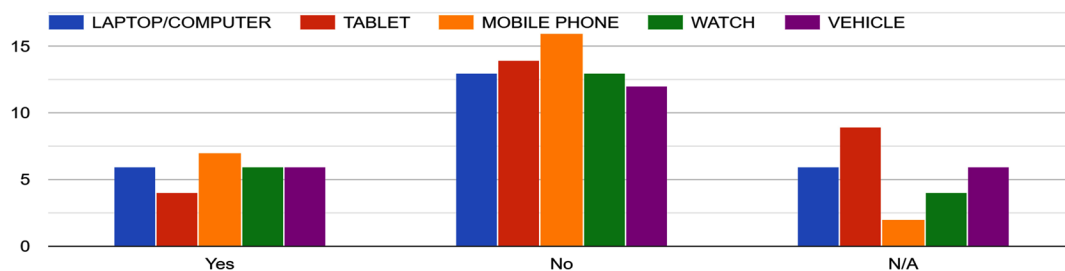


Figure 7. Repurchase of updated versions of technology.

Insights:

- Expenditure on electronics has increased because of online education & work from home.

4.6. Shift in Consumer Buying Behavior during Pandemic & Post-Pandemic (Figures 8-11)

During COVID-19

12. During the pandemic , did you buy items that you later felt was unnecessary and of no use or not matching the present trend and wanted to sold it or give it away?

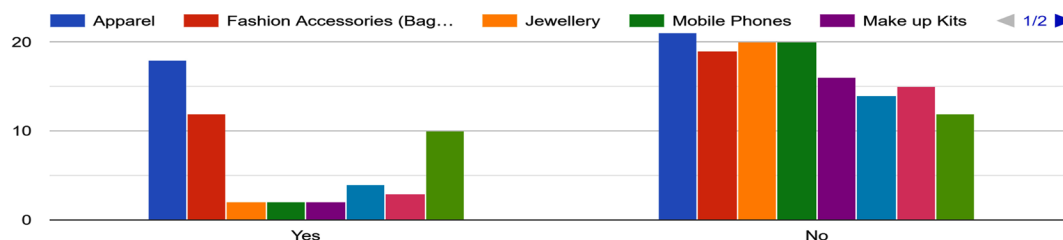


Figure 8. Purchase of items during COVID-19, that seemed useless post COVID-19.

Post-COVID 19

13. After the pandemic is over, in the new normal situation, will you focus on buying bigger, better, expensive, luxurious products and services in the following categories?

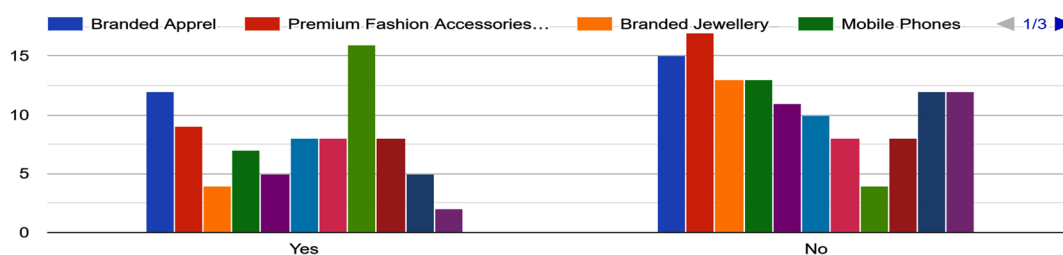


Figure 9. Instances of buying luxurious brands post COVID-19.

14. Presently, does your cupboard consist of items that you haven't used for months or even years and might have completely forgotten about it

43 responses

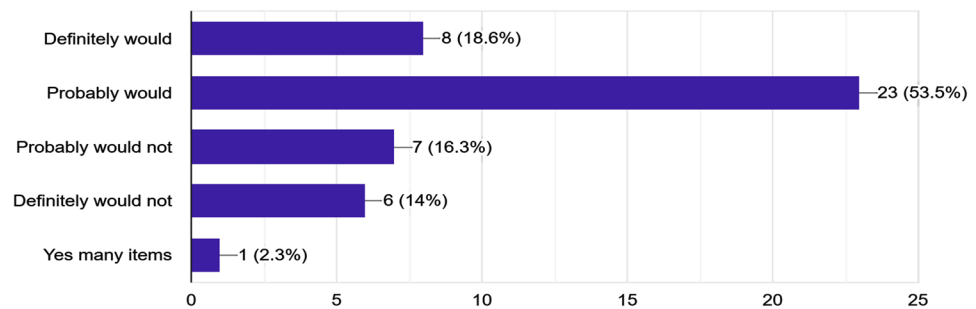


Figure 10. Instances of unused products in the cupboard of consumers.

16. Do you think that there has been a considerable shift in your buying behaviour during/after the pandemic?

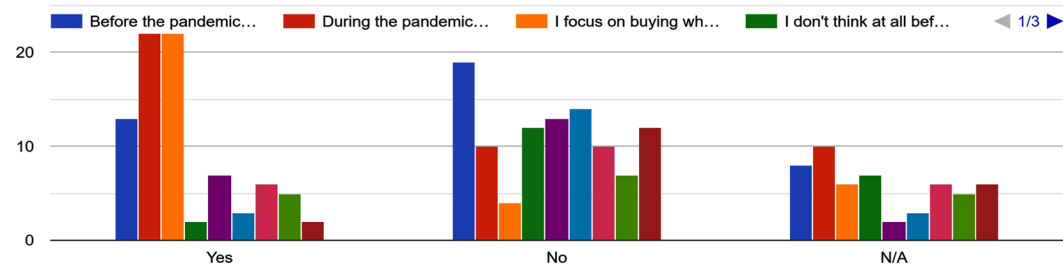


Figure 11. Shift in buying behaviour during and after COVID-19.

Insights:

- A significant majority of the consumers perceived that the apparel and fashion accessories they purchased during the pandemic had limited utility as it lost value once the pandemic subsided. This may be due to overconsumption, impulsive buying or changes in their fashion preference and lifestyle with the new normal.
- During the pandemic most individuals stockpiled healthcare products, that seemed redundant or unnecessary with the cessation of Covid-19. Over preparation during the pandemic and evolving public health guidelines post pandemic may have contributed to these phenomena.
- In the Post Pandemic era consumer spending habits have shifted, with a significant inclination towards fashion accessories & apparel. This trend is characterized by resurgence in demand for fashion & a renewed lifestyle with the new normal, return to pre-pandemic routines, a need of self expression and creativity after a prolonged period of restriction.
- A significant majority of consumers have admitted of possessing items that remained unused throughout the pandemic. This phenomenon highlights hoarding behaviour, stockpiling items through frequent purchases due to fear of uncertainty, leading to unused purchases. Overconsumption-excessive

unnecessary buying leading to surplus purchases resulting from fear.

- A significant majority of respondents reported a significant shift in their purchasing habits during the pandemic, thereby adopting a more mindful approach to consumption.

5. Discussion

Of the 43 respondents, 67.4% were male, and 32.6% were female. The majority of the respondents, that is, 41.8%, were in the age group of 25 to 44 years; 23.3% were between 31 to 40 y years of age; only 9.3% were below 18 years, and the remaining 9.3 % were between 41 - 54 years. 11.6% were within the age group of 18 - 30 years. Most of the respondents (37.2%) had a monthly family income of Rs 70,000 or less; 25.6% had a monthly income of Rs 70,137 - Rs 273,098; 9.3% had an income between Rs 273,167 - Rs 845,955 while, 27.9% earned Rs 846,023 or more every month.

Occupations of the respondents ranged from Chartered Accountant, Accountant, HR Professional, homemaker, Engineer, Software Engineer, Software Developer, Product Designer, IT professional, Regional Sales Manager, Media Professional, Product Marketing Manager, Interior Designer, Sales Manager, Product Marketing Manager, Banker, Software Engineer, Teacher, Lawyer, Entrepreneur, and Lawyer. Regarding educational qualifications, 53.5% of the respondents were graduates with a professional degree, while 34.9% were post-graduates without professional qualifications; 7% were diploma holders.

The notable feature of expenditure before the lockdown (24th March 2022) is that the money spent on healthcare products and Kits was significantly low, which increased dramatically during and after the lockdown.

Groceries classified as a commodity of high necessity show no significant change in expenditure before, during, and after the lockdown. This implies that people went on to buy the same quantity of groceries for the family, and no expenses were curtailed regarding grocery items. Consumption of Fashion Accessories (Shoes, watches, eyewear, sunglasses, bags, purses, belts) increased during the lockdown period compared to the pre-lockdown era. This finding might point towards the psychological condition of the respondents during the lockdown when all social ties were cut off owing to the crises. Besides, financial in-security like unemployment and salary cuts, might have contributed to an unstable mental state. Consumption of commodities like fashion accessories and apparel provided temporary satisfaction and enjoyment to many. Thus, many individuals considered shopping a recreational activity during the lockdown period. Several factors might have contributed towards this trend: 1. Pent-up Demand: Post lock-down there was a sudden surge in retail spending due to pent-up emotions and demands. 2. New Normal: With lock-down being lifted, consumers adopted to the new normal and thus, buying more of fashion accessories and apparel, as work resumed and social gatherings were permitted. Besides, some respondents noted that they did not change their consumption patterns post-lockdown.

23% of the respondents demonstrated a remarkable commitment towards apparel consumption, electing not to cut costs even during the lockdown period, a time of uncertainty and restrictions. This statistics represents a resilient and dedicated approach to their lifestyle choices, a prioritization of fashion, & lifestyle over uncertainties. A notable 9% of respondents exhibited financial prudence by intentionally cutting costs on apparel during the lockdown period, demonstrating a proactive approach, driven by a desire to build resilience, mitigate financial uncertainty or simply adopt to the new economic and social reality.

Their mindful approach towards consumption could indicate a growing awareness of the importance of sustainable spending habits. Electronic Appliances depicted a balanced trend: 37% of the population did not cut costs, while 34% focused on intensive cost-cutting on electronic items during the lockdown.

Healthcare products show a predictable trend, as 41% of the respondents never did any cost-cutting regarding healthcare commodities. However, 34% did focus on some cost-cutting when it came to healthcare products, and 79% of the population did conscious cost-cutting when it came to eating at restaurants post-lockdown. It might be that the fear of getting infected through restaurants. Covid-19's impact on consumer behaviour is starkly evident in the fashion industry, with a significant 67% of the population exhibiting no or very minimal restraint in their spending on fashion accessories. This suggests that the prolonged stress and uncertainty of the pandemic led to impulsive buying behaviour, as individuals found solace in retail therapy. The reality that respondents turned to online shopping as a means of entertainment to cope with the crises and stressful situations, reveals a deeper psychological dynamics at play. Buying apparel and fashion accessories provided a temporary solace and escape from anxiety and stress that the pandemic had induced. This phenomenon predicts a trend of acquisitive consumption, during and post-lock down period, highlighting the significance of brands and e-commerce as a primary channel for consumption during times of crises and uncertainty caused by a pandemic like Covid-19. This finding has important implications for the Fashion industry. A significant majority (81%) of respondents prioritized household supplies as a necessity and abstained from cutting costs in this area. Similarly, a substantial proportion (61%) of respondents considered skincare and makeup products essential. These might be the fashion conscious people, who are immensely concerned about the way they present themselves to the world. Although a notable minority of 37% adopted cost cutting measures in the skin care and makeup category, indicating a more cautious approach to spending. The data suggests that household supplies are considered important and essential, with a high percentage of respondents unwilling to compromise on these necessities. Make up and skincare is also considered important, though at a lesser extent. Factors like demographic insights, age, income, occupation, gender, social status must have impacted the buying behaviour of respondents significantly. Economic Implica-

tions: Skincare and make up industry must alter their marketing strategies during a crisis. Industries catering to household supplies may have a stable business running during a crisis, yet they too must have marketing strategies to combat a crisis. Marketing implications: The survey results indicate that consumers prioritize essential items over discretionary spending during a pandemic that brings with it economic uncertainty. This finding can indeed influence marketing and sales strategies across various industries. No panic buying/herd buying was noted in this study, even when respondents' lives were uncertain.

Repetitive consumption is a means of overconsumption (as the theory states). Temperance in repetitive consumption has been noticed in this study, as respondents preferred buying reusable products post-pandemic. Preference for disposable products was not solely due to the pandemic but also due to concern for the environment, as noted by many respondents who bought reusable items because they felt they would be environmentally friendly. They bought reusable products long before COVID-19. However, due to the pandemic, few used reusable products to save money and focus on cost-cutting.

Acquisitive Consumption was high during the lockdown and post-lockdown. Respondents bought apparel and fashion accessories that they later felt were unnecessary. This finding also corroborates the theory that stress/fear/depression caused by the lockdown and the sudden pandemic, where all social ties were suddenly cut off, resulted in a buying spree in many individuals. Consumption became an entertainment and provided a feel-good factor. These respondents also admitted that before the crises, they consumed items, especially apparel and fashion accessories, that they later felt were unnecessary and wanted to give away to charity. Consumers plan to keep spending on clothing and Fashion accessories in the new normal. Thus, even after the economic crises, acquisitive consumption is on the rise without any hint of mindful consumption.

Aspirational consumption was significantly high as consumers developed a savings habit during the lockdown. Aspirational consumption was high in the case of mobile phones, especially where respondents planned to acquire premium mobiles and, in many cases, tabs and laptops. Considerable money was spent by respondents on mobile phones, tablets, and laptops even during lockdown.

6. Findings

1) The pandemic has taught many financial lessons; people have developed savings habits and focus only on buying necessities. This is mainly due to salary cuts and fear of unemployment.

2) Acquisitive Consumption is on the rise even after the pandemic. Acquisitive Consumption behavior is exceptionally high for apparel, fashion accessories, mobile phones, laptops, and tablets. Mindful behavior regarding acquisitive consumption is absent among respondents.

3) For 53% of respondents, nothing has changed due to the pandemic, which

means their consumption pattern has not altered during and after the lockdown. This implies there has not been any change in buying behavior owing to COVID-19. So, it cannot be generalized that COVID-19 or any other epidemic/pandemic will change consumption behavior. Some of the population remains undeterred by such crises. They continue to consume in a way that suits their lifestyle and needs without focusing on cost-cutting or even being mindful of their consumption.

4) Part of the sample who agreed that there was a significant change in buying behavior after the pandemic focussed on purchasing necessary items (primarily groceries, household supplies, and health care products).

5) Big brands and peer pressure still play critical roles in influencing individuals' aspirational consumption behavior as life returns to the new normal.

6) Most consumers have a strong sense of self identity and confidence in their choice of brands and decision making abilities. These consumers are less likely to be influenced by social norms or fear of missing out. They prioritize their personal choice and preferences over external opinions. Thus, brands need to target and appeal this segment with personalized marketing efforts highlighting unique selling points (USP) of the brand.

7) The findings highlight the complex and adaptive nature of consumer behavior during times of crises. While some individuals like (53%) may have turned to hoarding and stock piling, depicting a trend of compulsive consumption as against mindful consumption. Contrarily, 47% respondents had become more intentional and thoughtful with their purchases, carefully considering each purchase. A shift towards mindful consumption possible driven by various factors like financial constraints, reduced and induced consumption habits owing to the pandemic uncertainty.

7. Conclusion

According to the survey, respondents preferred using reusable products over disposable ones to care for the natural environment. This attitude was not a result of the pandemic, but rather a mindset individual had developed long before the COVID-19 crisis. In other words, there has not been a significant shift in consumption behavior due to the pandemic. The respondents' consumption habits remained unchanged before, during, and after the lockdowns. Furthermore, acquisitive consumption was prevalent, even during the pandemic, indicating that shopping became a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Retail therapy as it is often called, provided a temporary escape and solace from the fear that dominated social life during the pandemic. The act of browsing, purchasing and acquiring new items offered a sense of control, comfort and momentary happiness, helping to alleviate the emotional toll to the pandemic situation. Contrary to expectations, the pandemic's economic instability had a surprisingly limited impact on individual's purchasing behavior. Despite the widespread financial uncertainty and an ambiance of fear

& anxiety, consumer spending habits did remain more or less consistent. A profound shift in consumer behavior marked by growing awareness of the need and importance of mindful consumption has been noted. During the pandemic, consumers have developed an awareness while consuming products and have prioritized needs over wants, embracing mindful consumption.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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