

Do Social Media Impact Consumer Buying Decisions in the Fashion Industry during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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ABSTRACT

Impact on consumer shopping behavior ramped up despite the fluctuations in the pandemic and lockdown in the past year due to of the social media. Because the advent of social media has changed the globe and the whole way it operates, putting the society and its peoples closer together even as a means of boosting customer assets through powerful communication during this challenging period. The purpose of this study is to define the characteristics of social media marketing factors and to examine the impact of those perceived factors upon customer purchasing decisions, given the immense concern in using social media marketing among fashion brands during the period of covid-19 pandemic. This research primarily fixated on five variables in social media, such as entertainment, interactions, trendiness, customization and word of mouth effect on the consumer purchasing decisions. A deductive methodology was taken, and 100 questionnaires, via the Google online form, were circulated to gather data. For data interpretation using SPSS, descriptive and inferential statistics were used such as mean value, standard deviation and correlation and regression analysis. The study of the data shows that social media-marketing factors like entertainment, communications, trends, customizing and word of mouth influence customer buying decisions, and that these factors have a positive relation with consumer purchase decisions. These results also revealed that women and individuals aged twenty-five to thirty-four years of age are more inclined to buy fashion-related products during this pandemic situation and suggested to develop marketing tools targeted at this particular category. Further, the results of this study will help fashion companies more specifically forecast the purchasing habits of their customers and control their investments and marketing efforts in this challenging period.

Keywords— Consumer Buying Decision, Covid-19, Fashion Industry, Social Media

I. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of COVID-19 has changed the world dramatically. People live differently, purchase differently and think differently in several ways. Supply chains have changed drastically. Doors are being barred by retailers. From a new lens, consumers around the world

gaze at goods and brands. With globalization, the world as a whole is becoming a diversified and mature marketplace and emerging technology made it more competitive. With the covid-19 pandemic there is an online shift in the consumer purchases and this shift is very significant and sustain.

Modern fashion creates markets which expand across a wide range with the advent of new technology. This fact is understood by the companies/brands in this industry in order to accomplish an optimistic and innovative development for the fashion market within those unforeseen circumstances in the pandemic.

The fashion industry may be called the clothing business in the form of a statement, but this fails to mention the essential contrast between fashion and clothing. Fashion includes clothes, boots, make-up, hair, perfumes, joys, accessories, home furnishings, cars, and writing devices. Clothing is one of society's most important priorities. These are based upon the biases of one's own nature, taste and culture. Modern fashion creates markets which expand across a wide range with the advent of new technology. This reality is realized by the companies/brands of this industry in order to achieve an ambitious and inventive growth for the fashion market. The fashion market is a high-quality, high-brand business center. Because of the growing demand for luxury in emerging economies such as China, India and the Middle East, business expansion is now more than ever necessary. Fashion brands have traditionally been able to rely on strong brand assets and secure loyal customers. But the recent entry into the luxury market of different fashion brands, driven by hot rivalry, is reflecting abrupt market changes.

A decrease in sales associated with a worldwide economic downturn drives luxury businesses to vary. Now they can't rely on their brand mark any more, but have to concentrate on brand heritage, performance, quality, and consumer relationships to be competitive. A crucial consideration in the luxury industry is to deliver consumer expectations in all possible aspects.

As a means to constitute customer assets by successful contact with customers, luxury brands have tilted their eyes toward social media (Ko,2012). The

advent of social media has changed the globe and the way it operates and brought the world and its inhabitants closer together. Social media refers to activities, practices and behaviors among individual groups collecting information, experiences and perspectives through social media social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). There are various social media, including Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, QQ, WeChat, Qzone, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, Vibrant, BaiduTieba, Skype, Line, SinaWeibo and Snapchat. World's top five social media platform, according to The Digital Report (2020), is: Facebook (2,449 million users), Youtube (2,000 M), WhatsApp (1,600 M), Facebook messenger (1,300 M) and WeChat (1,151 M).

According to Angella & Eunjo (2010) communications with social media like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have already been tested as resources for the launch of fashion brands. Brands and consumers connect through time, location and medium constraint to make old-fashioned one-way communication transformable into two-way interactive direct communication (Aytekin & Demirli (2017). Brands and consumers can work together to create new goods, services, business models and principles while, brands can expand and consumer relationships can be strengthened.

In one of the earliest studies on fashion blogs (Rickman & Cosenza 2007), it mentions that fashionable consumers today receive fashion ideas from media and digital platforms, social sharing and friends, street styles and so on. People also speak about these ideas online and ideas can be turned into patterns before they know them. This is why Social Media is now seeing to boost consumer relationships and eventually catch a bigger audience in the fast fashion industry (Mohr, 2013).

With the increased use of SMM by brands, it has become highly necessary to quantitatively analyze the effects of the social media. Social media marketing activities connect consumers and businesses through social media drives.

A large number of drivers can be identified in social media marketing activities. Kim and Ko (2012) have categorized social media marketing factors as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). This study examines the social media marketing factors from Kim and Ko's (2012) five perspectives. Recently, several researchers explored the effect on consumer purchase decisions of social media. Consumers use social media to provide them with direct access to information (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), help them decide what to buy or know about new brands, when and where they want to buy (Powers et al., 2012). Consumers' purchasing decision process is an important part of consumer behaviour and this study considers the consumers' purchasing decision process as consumer behaviour. Thus, the purpose of this study is to

define the characteristics of social media marketing factors and to examine the impact of those perceived factors upon customer purchasing decisions, given the immense concern in using social media marketing among fashion brands during the period of covid 19 pandemic.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

When COVID-19 exploded, the change in consumer behavior, allowing companies to also meet their most trustworthy buyer in the public realm, improved dramatically. This tremendous challenge is beyond precedent and has compelled companies to create innovative strategies and respond to new normal circumstances (Carnevale and Hatak 2020).

Today social media is playing a significant role in business strategy in all over the world. There is a trend in using social media as the most effective marketing strategy to enhance consumer behaviour in many occasions. It helps to build a superior customer relationship by identifying core brands of the fashion industry.

The most popular SM used for different purposes by customers is: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Miller study (2010) has shown that over 11 million consumers are purchasing different goods and services from over 70 per cent of the many SM's, generating new product knowledge, and sharing suggestions with other customers.

According to a study conducted by Parson (2013), it showed that 60% of Facebook users say that they are more ready to recommend a product or service to their friends after following that brand on SM. Facebook has reached 51% of users who are buying various products (Matthews, 2021). Another study indicated that after following the brand on SM, 79% of Twitter users say they are more able to recommend a product or service to their friends (Parson, 2013).

One of the most desirable and exciting industries in the world is the fashion industry. According to Global Fashion Industry Statistics (2020) the fashion industry constitutes around \$3 trillion and 2% of the world's gross domestic product. The retail sector in Sri Lanka is expanding rapidly, according to the Oxford Business Group (2017). In his report, Kambrugamuwa (2015) noted that fashion retailing is a wide (39 per cent) sector that shows great potential for growth. In addition, he indicated that there is a very less online presence of Sri Lankan fashion retailers (10%-15%) compared with other developing countries.

But when we consider the Sri Lankan fashion industry, only few fashion brands are using social media to promote their products. As per the data report 2019 more than 06 million Sri Lankans are using social media to communicate with others while there is a 4.3% annual digital growth of active social media users in Sri Lanka. If

this growth of social users is targeted on this market, it can also be a trend to gain opportunities in Sri Lanka despite the prevailing covid-19 pandemic situation and significant as the orientation of customers is open to transition.

People now tend more to browse the web and shop online. After reviewing web-based content, they discuss, compare, rate and rank items, especially via social media and social networking sites. People around the world can select from a variety of preferences. Consumers purchase things that they know and feel comfortable. The desires and comfort of the customer are focused on the innate elements that drive the decision maker. Rapid technological advances and modern lifestyles have led to stiff competition in the fashion industry. Businesses use a variety of strategies to compete in the marketplace. Consumer needs are changing day by day and with the impact of globalization, the fashion factor has become more pronounced. Businesses therefore use different social media approaches as marketing strategies.

Accordingly, this study focuses on analyzing how social media marketing activities affect consumer buying decisions during covid-19 pandemic based on new technology and markets and tried to achieve the following objectives:

1. To determine whether there is an impact of the social media marketing factors on consumer buying decisions in fashion industry during the covid-19 pandemic.
2. To identify the key factors of social media marketing that effect on consumer buying decisions.
3. To determine the relationship between social media marketing factors and consumer buying decisions.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of fashion bloggers, according to Lee (2009), has a huge influence on the fashion industry. Where social media networks such as face book and twitter have become the most invaluable and useful resources for brands to monitor the reaction of customers and provide real time customer service in the fashion field (Lee, 2009). Furthermore, Bourne (2010) said that social media sites provide a world-wide fashion outlet for growing stylists, bloggers and designers. The customizable and adaptable network site interface is described as an excellent forum for a broader public and business expansion in an interactive environment (Olivier, 2008).

Social media are computer based tools that enable people in virtual communities and networks to create, share, or exchange information, ideas, and pictures / videos. Social media is defined as "a community of internet-based applications based on Web 2.0's conceptual

and technical foundations that allow user-generated content to be produced and shared" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

Social media often use web and mobile platforms to create deeply immersive networks by linking, co-creating, exploring and modifying content created with users. They introduce numerous and enticing connectivity improvements between corporations, organisations, cultures and people. The key focus in the evolving self-studies field is these shifts. Social media vary in many respects in content, scope, frequency, accessibility, immediacy and longevity from conventional and industrial media.

Social Media Marketing (SMM) is the action of companies actively participating on SM platforms. This means publishing content, interacting with users, and creating company owned profiles in order to achieve their business and marketing goals. Social media give advertisers extraordinary opportunities in their social networks to meet customers and develop more personal relationships with them (Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan, 2010). The way brand content is created, posted, and consumed, social media have changed the way brand images are formed by marketers to online user interactions and content (Tsai & Men, 2013).

There are also advantages since many businesses are using social media marketing strategies. Evidently, social media marketing enables businesses to gather customer experience through chat analysis and ranking systems. It is also easier to recognize and meet user audiences and cultures who can serve as brand ambassadors and raise their visibility. One more bonus, and perhaps one of the most important, is the relatively low cost of social media ads. In reality, it's one of the cheapest ways to do ads since most social media platforms are public.

Social networking is essentially a place where advertisers connect with their consumers or potential customers and establish a strong partnership (Kelly et al., 2010). Kim and Ko (2012) clarified the five dimensions of brand social media marketing activities in the following ways: interaction, entertainment, customizing, Word of Mouth (WOM), and trend. In this connection, they provide the social media to communicate and exchange information with each other (Richter and Koch, 2007).

Entertainment derives from the fun and play that arises from the use of social media (Agichtein et al, 2008). The hedonic viewpoint considers social media users as watching and enjoying pleasure seekers (Manthiou, Chiang, & Tang, 2013). Entertainment is a key component that encourages participant activity and follow-up consistency, generating positive emotions / feelings about the brand in the minds of social media followers (Kang, 2005).

According to Kim and Ko (2012), entertainment has a positive impact on consumer behavior and the creation of improved brand and consumer experiences. Park et al (2009) note that entertainment drives social networking to some degree while Muntinga et al. (2011) found that social media users consume brand-related content for entertainment, rest and fun.

Gallaugh & Ransbotham (2010) note that the relationship of social media between brands and consumers is profoundly shifting. Interaction between companies and consumers shares information (Dougherty, Eastin, and Bright, 2013). Social media engagement was also described as a platform for users to communicate, contribute to discussions, provide input on specific products or services, and meet with like-minded people on certain topics (Muntinga et al.2011).

Daugherty et al. (2013) found that a major factor for producing user created content is social interaction. Recent studies have promoted engagement between social media and customer behavior (Becker, Barrot & Maecker, 2016). Kaplan and Heinlen (2010) show that social interaction is a significant factor in the development of content created by the user.

Trendy ensures that consumer product information is up to date (Godey et al, 2016). Social networking gives consumers all the new brand details (Naaman et al, 2011). According to Muntinga et al. (2011), the social media trend is focused on trendy news covering four sub-motivations like surveillance, knowledge, pre-buying content, and inspiration. Surveillance explains social environment observation and keeping informed.

Customisation as an element is the act of creating loyalty for consumers through individual user experiences (Ding and Keh, 2016; Seo and Park, 2018). The degree of the customization indicates how much a service is tailored to suit the needs of an individual (Schmenner, 1986). Customization is efficient for businesses to increase customer engagement through product styling and customization (Schmensner, 1986). Brands can also customize and communicate their individuality and generate stronger brand affinity and loyalty through the customization of their site (Martin & Todorov, 2010).

Social media link eWOM with online consumer-to-consumer brand interactions (Muntinga et al., 2011). The general definition of interpersonal market interaction (Walsh and Mitchell 2010) was created to be customer-to-customer communication, which may affect consumer attitude towards brands (Kumar et al. 2010; Sridhar and Srinivasan 2012) and purchase decisions (Abubakar et al, 2016). Word of the mouth is a major driver in consumer participation (Van Doorn et al, 2010). Research shows that eWOM has greater consumer confidence, empathy and relevance than Internet awareness created by marketers (Thomas, Osmonbekov & Andrew, 2006).

The consumer behaviour is one of the massively studied concepts by the researchers and marketers in the past and still being studied. One of the common views is that understanding consumer behaviour has become an element that includes a direct impact on the whole performance of the companies (Kotler and Keller, 2012). Another view suggests that understanding consumer behaviour has become crucial, especially as a result of immense competition within the UK and worldwide retail industry (Lancaster et al, 2002).

Alternatively, consumer buying behaviour “refers to the buying behaviour of ultimate consumers, both individuals and households, who buy goods and services for private consumption” (Kumar, 2010). From marketers’ point of view issues specific aspects of consumer behaviour that require to be studied include the explanations behind consumers making purchases, specific factors influencing the patterns of consumer purchases, analysis of changing factors within the society and others.

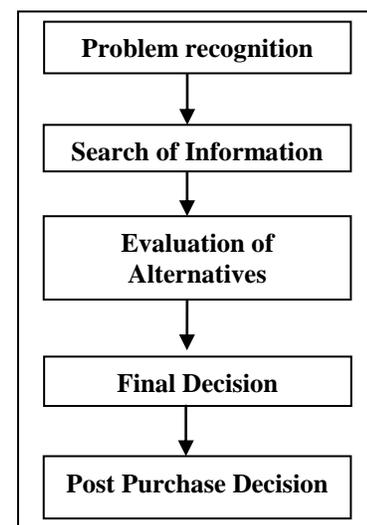


Figure 1: Consumer Decision making process
(Source: Philip Kotler,2008)

Different studies have provided empirical evidence of the impact on consumer behavior of social media as a whole. According to Vollmer and Precourt (2008), customer searches and buying decisions are more commonly made in different forms of social media. Ryan & Jones (2009) have suggested that social media marketing goods and services are low-cost and produce a higher return, making it useful for social media to connect and prefer efficient advertising strategies for customers. Moreover Bruhn et al. (2012) also explain the positive and significant link of social media communication and purchase intentions by conducting an online survey of 393 participants.

In the context of a COVID-19 crisis, it is much

more critical that the high environmental and social costs of the manufacture of fashion be examined in order to discourage unmodified and redundant garments from being made. Moreover, several fast trend businesses declared that shortly after the government has formed the closure, they will cancel their orders (Business & Human Resource Centre, 2020). These announcements adversely affected the behavior of customers against fashion firms, as cancellations of orders would trigger another problem, that is, unemployment and bad working people at the manufacturing sites involved. In order to prevent negative environmental and social consequences arising from over-stock and order cancellations, it is therefore necessary to research customer behavior, in regard to apparel markets during the COVID-19 crisis (Pantano et al: 2020).

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether social media marketing drivers have an impact on consumer purchasing decisions and realize on the factors such as entertainment, trendiness, customization, interaction and word of mouth. Based on these factors five hypotheses were developed as follows:

- H1.** Social media marketing activities of entertainment have positive impact on consumer behavior.
- H2.** Social media marketing activities of interaction have positive impact on consumer behavior.
- H3.** Social media marketing activities of trendiness have positive impact on consumer behavior.
- H4.** Social media marketing activities of customization have positive impact on consumer behavior.
- H5.** Social media marketing activities of word of mouth have positive impact on consumer behavior.

To identify whether there is an impact of social media drivers on consumer buying decisions correlation and regression were used and researchers aimed at finding the relationship type and explanatory power of independent variables to explore the dependent variable.

The population of this study considered the aged 15 to 55 in the District of Colombo. A questionnaire sent online was conveniently used to compile a sample of 100 individuals. The quantitative survey approach was used in this research to gather data. The answer to the selected sample will be gathered and each individual's response will be treated as a single data source from a Self-administered, Standardized Questionnaire. Three sections were included in study questionnaire. The first segment consists of population data (Age, Gender, income, Educational level and Area). The second segment deals with problems relevant to the marketing of social media. The third segment deals with concerns about the use and impact in customer purchase decisions of social media variables. Secondary data have been used to explain the priorities and

the issue and to encourage research. They can be categorized as books, reports, articles and websites related to social media marketing and consumer behavior. Two variables were used for inspection. The dependent variable is consumer buying decision. The independent variable is social media marketing factors.

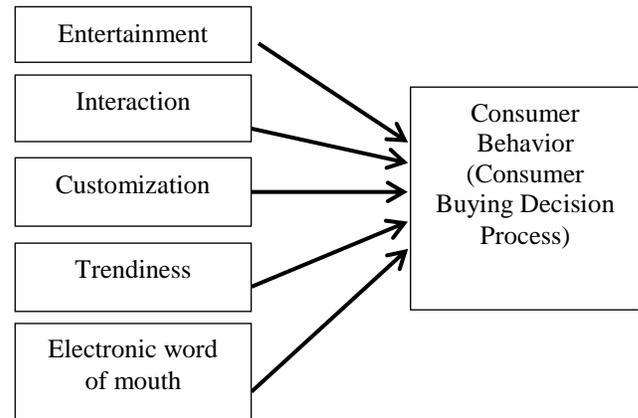


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Source: (Developed by researchers)

V. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Sample Description

According to the demographic information, there was no significant gender difference in the sample (52% versus 48%). By age group, 61% of the majority belongs to the 25 - 34 age group. According to occupation factor the majority of 63% belongs to the salaried persons. Also that 62% of the majority belong to the unmarried group. In terms of income factor, a 43% majority belongs to the income category of 30000-40000.

Reliability Analysis

To identify the reliability of the each construct that is used to measure the research variables reliability tests was performed before the statistical analysis. The results are depicted in the table 1 and according to the results; questions considered in the questionnaire can be accepted as the Cronbach Alpha is greater than its minimum of 0.700.

Table 1: Cronbach’s Coefficient Alpha Value

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
Entertainment	.841	4
Interaction	.847	4
Trendiness	.853	4
Customization	.732	4
Word of mouth(eWOM)	.871	4
Consumer behaviour	.822	3

(Source: Survey data, 2020)

Based on the sample of 100, willingness to buy online for each occupation was analyzed. 68.25% of salaried persons, students and Self-employed peoples have agreed to buy online. Also, 31.75% of those peoples in above occupations refused to buy online. But all respondents of housewives and retired persons have agreed to buy online.

Table 2: Age and use of social media Cross tabulation

AGE * SOCIAL MEDIA Cross tabulation

Count	SOCIAL MEDIA						Total
	Face book	You Tube	Instagram	WhatsApp	Viber	Other	
-18	1	0	2	0	0	0	3
18-24	11	1	2	1	3	0	18
25-34	42	9	1	7	0	2	61
35-44	5	0	2	0	1	0	8
45-54	2	2	0	2	0	0	6
AGE 55+	0	2	0	1	1	0	4
Total	61	14	7	11	5	2	100

(Source: Survey data, 2020)

Based on the analysis of the 100 samples, Table 2 shows the relationship between people of each age group and the social media they use to obtain fashion related information. The face book is the most used social media out of the entire sample. They are 61 people. Of those who use the face book, 42 belong to the 25-34 age group and 11 are to the 18-24 age group.

Table 3: Independent Sample T-Test of dependent variable and gender

Variable	Gender	Std.			T	Sig.
		N	Mean	Deviation		
Consumer buying decision	Male	52	12.0192	2.13735	.175	.224
	Female	48	11.9375	2.53827	.173	

(Source: Survey data, 2020)

Independent sample t-test was conducted to see whether there is a significant difference among gender groups in purchasing online. The result of t-test reveals that there is an insignificant relationship between gender and consumer buying decision. The result showed gender is not a reasonable factor to influence on consumer buying decision ($p > 0.05$).

Table 4: One-Way ANOVA Test of dependent variable and occupation

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	9.214	4	2.303	.415	.797
Within Groups	526.746	95	5.545		
Total	535.960	99			

(Source: Survey data, 2020)

Considering Table 4, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted to identify the effect of difference between individual occupational groups on the consumer buying decision of the selected sample. Accordingly, the Sig value is 0.797, which is more than 0.05. So, it concluded that there is an insignificant relationship between individual occupational groups and consumer buying decisions. ($F = 0.415, p < 0.05$).

Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables

Descriptive statistics were calculated to identify the basic nature of this research variable. In here researcher tries to identify the level of responses given by the sample regarding each independent variables and dependent variable.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	
Entertainment	15.3300	2.60169	-1.098	.241
Interaction	15.2800	2.65178	-.631	.241
Trendiness	15.9900	2.75056	-1.238	.241
Customization	15.3900	2.45318	-.568	.241
Word of Mouth	14.8700	3.04397	-.823	.241
Consumer behaviour	11.9800	2.32674	-1.154	.241

(Source: Survey data, 2020)

According to the above table, mean values for all the independent variables show that respondents are either agreed or strongly agreed with the given questions as well for dependent variable the mean value is relatively low compared with the independent variables.

Regression Analysis

Table 6: Model summary

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	RStd. Error of the Estimate
1	.833 ^a	.694	.678	1.32118

Table 7: ANOVA

Model	Sum Squares	ofdf	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	371.881	5	74.376	42.610	.000 ^b
Residual	164.079	94	1.746		
Total	535.960	99			

(Source: Survey data, 2020)

According to the Table 6, adjusted R square value of the regression was 0.678. It indicated that 67.8% of variation of the consumer buying decisions was effectively explained by the considered independent variables. The respective Sig. value of the ANOVA test was 0.000. It was less than 0.05 and it indicates that the developed regression line was strong enough to predict the behavior of the dependent variable (consumer buying decision), in accordance with the changes of the independent variables (entertainment, trendiness, interaction, customization and word of mouth).

Table 8: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-.204	.928		-.220	.827
Entertainment	.186	.077	.208	2.427	.017
Interaction	.133	.095	.152	1.399	.165
Trendiness	.142	.099	.168	1.434	.155
Customization	.120	.105	.127	1.149	.253
Word of Mouth	.213	.085	.279	2.517	.014

a. Dependent Variable: Consumer Behavior

(Source: Survey data, 2020)

According to the table 08, the P values for Interaction, Trendiness and Customization are 0.165, 0.155 and 0.253 respectively ($p > 0.05$). Hence, these variables are not significant predictions to effect on the consumer buying decision. The P values for the Entertainment and Word of mouth (e-WOM) are 0.017 and 0.014 respectively ($p < 0.05$). Thus these variables are significant predictors effecting on the consumer buying decision. Thus only two hypothesis of the study were accepted while other three were rejected.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study focuses on the influence of social media marketing in the fashion industry in Colombo district on customer behavior during the period of covid-19 pandemic. This study is critical for fashion markets in manufacturers; sellers in whole and retail to change their marketing strategies and to understand current market trends and expand their business via social media marketing activities as the pandemic situation will lasts in the world for a comparative future.

A questionnaire was sent to 100 and majority of those who answered to questions concerning the customer purchase decision-making process were agreed or agreed strongly. These findings show that the majority of respondents believe that social media marketing factors have an effect on their fashion industry purchasing decisions in the pandemic. The second challenge is to define the key factors that influence customer shopping preferences among these marketing factors in social media. This research identified five social media marketing factors as entertainment, interactive, trendiness, customization and word of mouth (e-WOM) based on the findings of previous research. The last objective of the research was to identify the relationship between social media marketing factors and consumer buying decisions.

According to the regression analysis, the two independent variables, entertainment and word of mouth, have a significant and positive affiliation with consumer buying decisions. The interaction, trend, and customization variables have an insignificant positive association with consumer buying decisions. As a new trend, social media creates superior customer relations in the fashion industry. Marketers will then thrive by taking these considerations into account with strategies for social media marketing. According to this report, many consumers tend to shop online due to the conditions such as social distancing and ongoing lockdowns. Research reveals that Facebook is the most widely used social network for information on fashion. Therefore, Facebook can be used for social media campaigns as an efficient strategy.

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