

# After markets close in panic: Investigating consumer online apparel shopping behaviour and influencing factors

Snigdha Mahajan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Vandana Sonwaney<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Symbiosis Institute of Operations Management, Nashik, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Symbiosis Institute of Operations Management, Nashik, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India

<sup>1</sup>snigdha.mahajan@siom.in

## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has impacted the entire world in a way that no sector has remained unaffected. Indian Textiles and Apparels Industry being one of the essential sectors for Indian economy has taken a hard hit. It is one of those industries where touch and feel is a vital part for a customer to check the quality of fabric and relying on 'try before buy' experience. This paper is an endeavor to study the relationship between COVID-19 crisis and clothing consumption patterns. This research highlights the COVID-19 threat that has caused a significant shift of preference in apparel buying platform from an in-store to online shopping. The study emphasizes on how consumers have started embracing the online stores in this new normal. Hypothesis testing was conducted to analyze the changing apparel buying behavior of customer in India during this time of pandemic.

## Keywords

COVID-19; Changing Trends; Online Apparel Shopping; Consumer Buying Behaviour, India.

Article Received: 10 August 2020, Revised: 25 October 2020, Accepted: 18 November 2020

## Introduction

Life was tremendously fast, as everything from a tissue to a plane ticket was only a single click away. All the gatherings, tours & trips temporarily came to a stop with the acquaintance of COVID-19 with the globe. The circumstance of the COVID-19 flare-up, made individuals think dynamically and presented ultimate determination of how families have balanced their spending preferences.

In Apparel Industry, trend changes are very frequent, which is one of the reasons that consumers are always interested in buying clothes even if they have ample. People shop for various reasons like specific occasion, gifting, daily wears or also treat shopping as a therapy. That is why demand for clothing is never off the table. With e-commerce bringing clothing stores home, along with its convenience and continuous evolution, it has gained the trust of consumers immensely. With plethora of online clothing sites and the wide range of categories of clothes available online, the customer base grew every day. The brick and mortar clothing stores, however, have their own charm. The entire physical experience of buying clothes completely differs from online shopping. Based on past research, it is observed that apparel shopping from retail stores is generally a spontaneous action and the derived pleasure and satisfaction of buying is more than that received from online shopping. Customers are genuinely content about their buy from retail stores, as they are able to evaluate well by trying the garment out and judging the quality based on touch and feel of the fabric. The COVID-19 has taken a huge toll on the retail stores. Due to the severe lockdowns there was a drastic decline in sales. All stores were shut and logistics service for non-essential items was revoked. Even after the national lockdown has been removed, the physical stores haven't seen many customers. This pandemic period did not only affect the overall domestic demand dramatically but also the

attitude of loyal customers of retail clothing stores towards online shopping.

According to Bhattacharya (2020), online showcasing and shopping patterns among customers are influenced by this uncertain epidemic. Had the lockdown circumstances proceeded for a more long drawn period, it would have been tough for the giant e-commerce leaders such as Myntra, Flipkart, Amazon and so forth to hold their workforces as their gigantic turnover would have severely been impacted. Thankfully, the unlock SOPs put in place by the Government provided much required relief to the on-line apparel stores and saved a large number of gig workforce from losing their jobs.

As per the current status, Coronavirus (COVID-19) has contaminated more than 24.8 million individuals globally (World Health Organization, 2020). According to the clinical science the virus is very contagious and it spreads fundamentally through contacting the infected person, by being airborne through cough or sneeze or even by touching the surface that is contaminated by virus, so the best way chosen by governments world over is to insist on people to stay at home and stay safe. In the context of India, anecdotal evidence suggests that stay at home phenomena has augmented the number of First Time Users (Fetus), earlier who were inhibited to shop online.

In today's world, organizations working in growing markets face several problems. A few challenging factors such as environmental, social, technological, economic and legal are imposing restrictions on the ability of corporations to continue functioning in a rigid unidirectional way. In these trying times companies need to be nimble and adaptive to the changing environment conditions and need to implement new marketing methods to survive, as well as to deal with the situation. Corporations are able to endure their existence by estimating the vivid buying behaviour of consumers and changing proactively their marketing strategies (Akkaya and Tabak, 2017). This could be attained if they are able to

forecast consumer behaviour in an assailant context & achieve them sustainably. The perceiving and consequently purchasing behaviours of the consumers cover cognizance & impulsive process established on necessity & demands.

This paper seeks to investigate consumer behaviour particularly with reference to apparels market during the pandemic, amidst the lockdown, which was imposed in many parts of the world. Each division and individual has been influenced severely by this epidemic in many ways.

## Research Objectives

The following are the major objectives of the study

- To compare the apparel shopping frequency of the consumers before and during COVID-19
- To understand the preference of apparel shopping by the consumers (In store vs. Online) during this pandemic

## Literature Review

Apparel buying is a necessity for a shopper as every person in the world tends to buy clothes even if their perception and requirements vary. Whether it is casual shopping, shopping for an event, festivals or to upgrade their wardrobe based on ongoing trends, buyers are generally offered with two key mediums - Physical stores and E-Commerce sites. Online shopping has become a major player in the retail industry as consumers are able to search their products online and place orders from the comfort of their homes. The alternative option i.e. the brick-and-mortar stores are no longer simply a platform but an experience that shoppers crave for, which is available in the form of malls, shopping centres or stores. COVID-19 pandemic has caused a profound effect on apparel buying patterns of consumer. People are living unusually, working differently & in many ways changing the way they shop. Customers across the globe are looking at stocks and brands through a new lens. The coronavirus is restructuring the consumer goods industry in real time. The following review of literature confirms that the presence of ecommerce has certainly increased over the period of time along with the rise in trust of the customers and how the perceived threat has influenced the apparel buying decisions.

Shopping online is a very different overall experience than shopping in a physical place. One significant difference between the two is the store atmospherics (Engel et al., 1990). This term depicts the actual parts of a store, for example colours, music type, music volume, beat and format of products. Store atmospherics simply influence consumer behaviour and their mood (East, 1997). Web stores so far can't completely recreate the atmosphere of an actual store as they lack the basic amenities and tangible essence. The constant enhancement in the framework of the E-retailing experience should make up for the absence of conventional in-store feeling (Shergill and Chen, 2005). In addition to the effect of trust and perceived risks related with internet based shopping, the factor of delight to the customer in the internet shopping experience is as well significant in holding on to the online customers (Rice, 1997). To shop from a commercial website, the presence of value-added information can be a significant motivation for individuals

to shop on the web and gives a great source of variety. Likewise, the in-depth data available to help shopper search, and multiple searches, systems with a positive experience will build shopping delight. The essential factor affecting genuine buying behaviour is the customers' attitude. A model of perspectives and shopping intention towards web shopping encompassed numerous markers, having a place with four chief categories; the value of the item, the shopping experience, the service quality offered by the site, and the risk perceptions of internet retail shopping (Jarvenpaa and Todd, 1997). More regular online purchasers were foreseen to enjoy the web-based business platforms as it improved their trust in the particular site than for less regular online purchasers (Vellido et al., 2000). With the technology advancement, ecommerce is also growing tremendously and this industry is working on continuous improvement by focussing on website design, website trustworthiness, customer service and belief as these are the four key factors influencing young consumers' perception (Muthalif, 2014). There is a constant harmony between an actual store and an online channel because of the diverse market segments and shoppers' perceptions. In spite of the way the online business has expanded fundamentally in the previous decade, the physical stores yet play a significant part as the primary area for selling, social cooperation, pickup, and being the hub for returns for online requests (Cao, 2018).

Risk perception was considered as the prime factor by individuals for decision making of whether to shop on the web or not from the nine parameters that were identified allied with customers' impression of internet shopping. Simplicity, and the control were the other separating points. Various studies emphasize on perception of threat or risk being a prime aspect for a consumer's decision making while buying clothes. Before the pandemic this threat was associated to online buying in the form of trust, secure transactions but now the case is reversed (Vellido et al., 2000). The risk of parasites and pathogens factually causes implicit or explicit reactions in humans. This response to a real or possible danger of any disease is hazardous for endurance from a developmental viewpoint (Altizer et al., 2003; Roy and Kirchner, 2000). Individuals reflect behaviours involving risk reduction strategies especially when they deal with the uncertainty and unusualness of the potential risk of catching a deadly disease. Ordinarily, they tend to over-respond against the danger, or depict irrational behaviour, especially observed in pandemic conditions (Hogg and Mullin, 1999; Van lair Bos, 2001). For example, stock up of essential things has been the most well-known issue for most of the nations at the beginning phase of the COVID-19, particularly when the news got spread regarding the national lockdown (Nicola et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020).

Every individual buying decision were pushed towards basic necessities, incurred by the behavioural driver 'wellbeing and healthy decisions' and that's how the socio-economic pyramid folded and smoothed. During the Vedic period 'health is wealth' had a significant impact on individuals just as at the public level (Dwivedi, 2016). During lockdown days, inner and outer drivers of customer behaviour like the brand image, character type, self and self-concept, status which previously were seen as noticeable drivers have

gotten subtle. It is moreover crucial to see that the major stresses of Indian customers were safety and security of self, family and overall general wellbeing. For example, shoppers drastic shift observed by markets as they deprioritise purchasing nice-to-have things and confine their consumption excluding rations and at-home showbiz (Mehta et al., 2020).

Sheth (2020) in his study discussed about post COVID-19 phase anticipating whether the old propensities would return or pass on. By implementing lockdown and executing social distancing, buyers' decision of the place to shop got confined. This has brought about location constraints and shortages. Regardless of whether it is work, school or shopping everything has changed and confined at home. Nonetheless, there is additional flexibility and time as individuals don't need to follow specific plans for going to class, to work, or to shop. The author also mentions about the complete lockdown in India, during that particular time consumers couldn't go to the market or the malls, instead, the shopping stores came home. This circumstance caused a significant change in the way of working, pedagogy, well-being, purchasing, and consumption. In a world where there is delivery right at home of anything and everything including streaming services such as Amazon Prime, Netflix, and so forth it is ending the traditional habit of actually visiting the physical stores for various day-to-day activities including groceries, malls, and cinemas. It is also enhancing convenience and customization in consumer behaviour. The Author elaborates on studying the impact of "In-home everything" on consumer's impulse buying. These measures have seriously influenced the regular day to day existence of customers and organizations, diminished the travel industry (World Tourism Organization, 2020) led to emergency buying situations (EPS) (Samson and Voyer, 2014) and retail market opening with exceptional difficulties. It was observed that purchasers were shopping in an unexpected way as a result of the stringent control measures.

To summarize, the previous literature suggests both in-store and online sites are holding strong position in the eyes of customer when it comes to buying apparel. But this pandemic has induced a deep threat in terms of health & safety and hence influenced buying behaviour. This paper, mainly focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the frequency of apparel buying and its preferred medium (online vs. in-store). Analysis is conducted based on a hypothesis that is developed on the COVID-19 pandemic changing the consumer apparel shopping pattern and is proven using Chi Square technique.

## Research Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

The conclusions of this research are based on hypothesis testing and quantitative analysis of primary data, wherein response is collected from different parts of India, to capture the buying preference of young and mobile urban population and their varying apparel shopping patterns. Secondary data and other research papers published to examine changes in consumer behaviour have also been relied upon.

### 4.2. Data Types

Primary and secondary data both have been examined in the context of the current study and results are derived through analysis.

### 4.3. Method of Data collection

Online survey method is used to gather primary data in which a structured questionnaire is filled by consumers. Previous research papers, journals, libraries, newspaper articles etc., were referred for the secondary data. For this study the data has been collected, processed and presented in the form of graphs & tables.

### 4.4. Sample Technique

The sampling method used in this study was convenience sampling method. Basis of the sample covers the apparel consumers from different parts of India. In alignment with the purpose of the study, a well-structured questionnaire was prepared with the intent of capturing the primary data.

### 4.5. Sample Profile

The present study deals with the changing Apparel consumer buying pattern during the pandemic period specifically. The study was conducted through an online survey form. The data was collected over a month during July – August, 2020. With respect to sample size, 210 consumers (respondents) were considered from different parts of India. Out of the overall 210, 98 were males and 112 were females and the age group of the sample ranged between 20 and 35.

To test the hypothesis of the impact of COVID-19 on apparel buying frequency and choice of platform, Chi square test was conducted.

## Data Gathering

To know the effect of COVID-19 on the Apparel industry, it was imperative to gather real-time data from the apparel customers. A survey was conducted by floating a questionnaire online to understand the effect on apparel purchasing patterns. The survey was a questionnaire which comprised of the questions based on which a sheet was prepared with respect to the probable responses which can be logged through the survey.

**Table 1.** Survey Questions with corresponding options

Survey Question	Scale Type	Range of Values	Code for option
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How frequently you used to order clothes online before COVID-19?</li> <li>How frequently you used to buy clothes from physical stores before COVID-19?</li> <li>How frequently you have ordered clothes online during COVID-19 period?</li> <li>How frequently you have bought clothes from physical retail stores during COVID-19 period?</li> </ul>	Ordinal	1-7	1. More than once in a week 2. Once in a week 3. Twice in a month 4. Once in a month 5. Once in two months 6. Once in three months 7. Not even once

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

Chi-square analysis is applied to form the relation between the categorical variables. In this analysis an alternate hypothesis is fixed upon and then based on this alternate hypothesis a null hypothesis is derived. The null or alternate hypothesis is accepted based on significance value which is pre-set for comparison. Comparison of observed frequencies in every response category is done with the frequencies we would expect if the null hypothesis were true in  $\chi^2$  test. By multiplying the observed sample size with the proportions specified in the null hypothesis, this is achieved.

### Hypothesis Findings:

**Hypothesis:** COVID-19 impacts the apparel shopping pattern

For this hypothesis COVID-19 impact was set as one category and the apparel customers' response to the questions regarding their shopping platform was set as the other category. Null and alternate hypothesis are formulated as:

Null Hypothesis: COVID-19 has not influenced the apparel shopping pattern

Alternate Hypothesis: COVID-19 has influenced the apparel shopping pattern

Following are the matrices for the observed (COVID-19 period) and the expected (Before COVID-19) frequencies for the two shopping platforms- In-Store and Online.

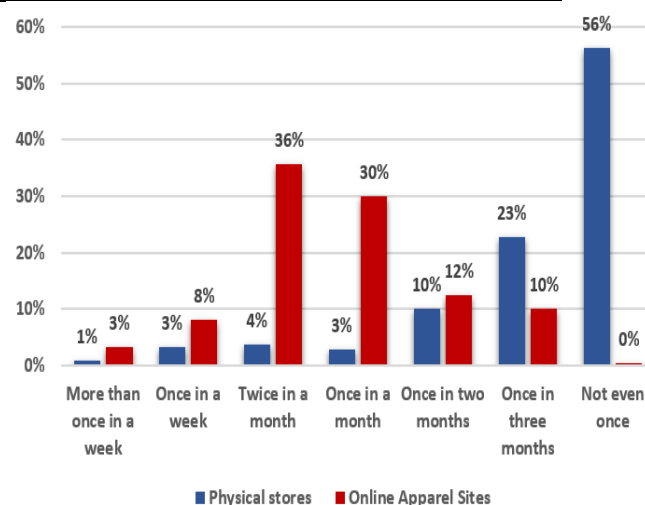
**Table 2.** Apparel Shopping Frequency | Online shopping

Online Shopping	More than once in a week	Once in a week	Twice in a month	Once in a month	Once in two months	Once in three months	Not even once	
Observed Frequencies(O)	7	17	75	63	26	21	1	210
Expected Frequencies(E)	6	9	54	57	29	47	8	210

**Table 3.** Apparel Shopping Frequency | In-store shopping

In-Store Shopping	More than once in a week	Once in a week	Twice in a month	Once in a month	Once in two months	Once in three months	Not even once	
Observed Frequencies(O)	2	7	8	6	21	48	118	210
Expected Frequencies(E)	11	21	53	61	35	23	6	210

As the sample size is  $n=210$  and the proportions stated in the null hypothesis are  $p_1=0.01$ ,  $p_2=0.06$ ,  $p_3=0.26$ ,  $p_4=0.27$ ,  $p_5=0.14$ ,  $p_6=0.24$  and  $p_7=0.02$  respectively for online shopping and  $p'_1=0.05$ ,  $p'_2=0.10$ ,  $p'_3=0.28$ ,  $p'_4=0.29$ ,  $p'_5=0.17$ ,  $p'_6=0.11$ ,  $p'_7=0.004$  respectively for in-store shopping. 'k' is the number of response categories and the degree of freedom (df) =  $k-1$  is  $7-1=6$ . The appropriate critical value found in the table of probabilities for the  $\chi^2$  distribution based on  $df=6$  and a 5% level of significance is 12.59. As for Apparel Shopping from online and in-store platform  $\chi^2$  values came out to be 36.89 and 2227.94 respectively and based on the decision rule as  $\chi^2 > 12.59$  null hypothesis is rejected. Hence it indicates that the apparel shopping pattern has significantly changed during the pandemic.



**Figure 1.** Physical Stores vs. Online Sites - Apparel Shopping Analysis during COVID-19



On referring Figure 1. it could be inferred how the apparel shopping has more frequently happened in the online mode during the time of COVID-19 pandemic. The table shows that 56% people did not shop at all through physical stores in this period but preferred shopping clothes through the online sites.

### Discussion and conclusion

In March 2020, most of the world went into lockdown, driving several businesses to a brief shut down. Cities are step by step calming restrictions, but the future is yet unclear. Even companies which are opening again have boundaries while putting in force social distancing, confining number of customers that can enter a space at one time, and wearing of masks.

When authentic way of shopping turns challenging, or may even be frightening, consumers are progressively inclined to shop online. The fact that people prior to the lockdown embracing Amazon and various other online stores with open arms has made this transition substantially relaxed.

The perks of shopping online aren't going to vanish even when retail businesses reopen entirely. All of this indicates to why this is the perfect time for corporations to either begin or double up on e-commerce efforts. This research provides a direction pointing that In-Store Apparel shopping frequency of the consumers during COVID-19 has dropped significantly compared to the time before COVID-19 period which is supported by the hypothesis tested. The research findings indicate that a notable shift of consumers is observed towards online apparel shopping during COVID-19.

### Limitation and Suggestions

The limitations of this study suggest areas for future research. The effect of the COVID-19 has been examined in this study, the effect of other contagions or adversities could be expected to impact consumer apparel purchasing behavior in the similar means. Future study requires to examine this subject for other circumstances. It is firmly believed that the geography and time period of the data gathering (i.e. between July and August 2020) could effect the outcomes. The research questions which are dealt with in this study could provide a higher degree of legitimacy for future studies with some other time period and in some other geography. Online survey was preferred as the medium for the empirical study as there was the unusual situation of pandemic where social distancing was necessary and encouraged. Also, much larger sample size may provide deeper insights about the diverse response of the population.

### References

[1] Akkaya, B., Tabak, A. (2017) The impact of dynamic capabilities on firm perceived marketing performance of small and medium sized enterprises. *Transnational Marketing Journal* 5(2):121-135.

- [2] Altizer, S., Harvell, D., Friedle, E. (2003) Rapid evolutionary dynamics and disease threats to biodiversity. *Trends Ecol. Evol. (Amst.)* 18 (11): 589–596.
- [3] Bhattacharya, A. (2020) Coronavirus may mark the end of many e-commerce companies in India. *Quartz India*.
- [4] Dwivedi, D. (2016) Wealth and its various aspects as depicted in Vedic literature. *Veda-Vidya* 28.
- [5] East, R (1997) *Consumer Behavior: Advances and Applications in Marketing*. London: Prentice Hall.
- [6] Engel, J.F., Blackwell, R.D. and Miniard, P.W., *Consumer Behavior*. Chicago: Dryden Press, 1990. Ganesan, S. (1994) Determinants of Long-Term Orientation in Buyer-Seller Relationships. *Journal of Marketing* 58(2): 1-19.
- [7] H Cao (2018) The growth of e-commerce and its impact on the fast fashion retailers. *University of Applied Sciences*.
- [8] Jarvenpaa, S.L. and Todd, P.A. (1997) Consumer Reactions to Electronic Shopping on the World Wide Web. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 1(2): 59-88.
- [9] Mehta et al. (2020) The New Consumer Behaviour Paradigm amid COVID-19: Permanent or Transient? *Journal of Health Management* 22(2): 291–301.
- [10] Murray, D.R., Schaller, M. (2010) Historical prevalence of infectious diseases within 230 geopolitical regions: a tool for investigating origins of culture. *J Cross Cult Psychol* 41 (1): 99–108.
- [11] Muthalif R. Abdul (2014) Online buying behaviour of young consumers in India. *An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal* 4(3): 68-76.
- [12] Nicola, M., Alsafi, Z., Sohrabi, C., Kerwan, A., Al-Jabir, A., Iosifidis, C., ... Agha, R. (2020) The socio-economic implications of the coronavirus and COVID-19 pandemic: A review. *Int. J. Surg.* 78: 185–193.

- [13] Rice, M. (1997) What makes users revisit a web site. *Marketing News* 31(6): 23.
- [14] Samson, A., & Voyer, B. G. (2014) Emergency purchasing situations: Implications for consumer decision-making. *Journal of Economic Psychology* 44: 21–33.
- [15] Shergill & Chen (2005) Web-Based Shopping: Consumers' Attitudes Towards Online Shopping in New Zealand. *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research* 6(2).
- [16] Sheth, J (2020) Impact of Covid-19 on consumer behavior: Will the old habits return or die? *Journal of Business Research* 117: 280-283.
- [17] Vellido, A., Lisboa, P.J.G. and Meehan K. (2000) Quantitative characterization and prediction of on-line purchasing behavior: A latent variable approach. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* 4(4): 83-104.
- [18] World Tourism Organization (2020) International tourist numbers could fall 60-80% in 2020. UNWTO reports