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## Impact of Different Social Media Channels on Online Buying behavior: Comparative Case Study of UK with Reference to COVID-19



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**Abstract:** COVID-19 has drastically affected the business sector all around the globe and its subsequent implications have changed the buying habits of consumers. This comparative inquiry seeks to evaluate the online buying behavior of customers amid different scenarios for developing an empirical idea how different social media platforms influenced the online purchase behavior of customers before and after global pandemic. The population of this study primarily encompasses the social media users. Objective responses are gathered from 100 respondents using online survey questionnaire and data is analyzed using statistical analysis techniques. The results have indicated an increase in the customer shift from physical shopping to the online shopping and also indicated that different social sharing platforms including Instagram and Facebook positively influenced the purchase intention of customers during the times of crisis.

**Key Words:** Online Purchase Behavior, UK, Social Media, COVID-19, Marketing.

### Introduction

The world has witnessed a significant change at the beginning of year 2020 in the form of corona virus (Mair, 2020), later named as COVID-19 (Mason et al., 2021). This change remarkably transformed the ongoing business practices, as focus of consumers shifted from physical markets to online markets (Schneider & Kokshagina, 2021). On March 12, 2020 UK imposed strict lockdown measures to limit the further spread of corona virus (Miles et al., 2021), and due to such lockdown measures, majority of the businesses in UK started to focus more on online retail channels and ultimately grabbed the attention of online buyers. In order to attract more buyers on online channels, different brands formulated and devised strategies to attract buyers who normally prefer to buy from physical

shops and marketplaces (Abdellahi & Kobbane, 2020), as a result, existing patterns of buying behavior changed significantly.

Social media is playing an incredible role in promoting and establishing the businesses online (Jenzen, 2017), because under the umbrella of innovative technologies actual reviews and feedbacks are being uploaded on the social media networks. (Huang et al., 2023). This usefulness is not just for the consumers but also a very useful technique for the business persons to adopt and expand their businesses (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Additionally, Social networks are playing an important role for sharing and exchange of different types of information among the customers who find online user's reviews reliable and helpful while making a purchase decision.

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These platforms have entirely transformed the nature of social interaction and marketing communication as renowned brands cannot think of a marketing plan and strategy that doesn't include social media marketing and promotions (Remidez & Jones, 2012).

Also, COVID-19 reveals the frenzy behavior of the buyers (Mao et al., 2020) as the sale of hand sanitizers increased up to 255% in UK within few days (Barr, 2020). Collinson (2020) added that online food delivery services increased by 51.5%, and grocery stores were slammed by the buyers after UK Prime Minister announced the lockdown measures (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Many customers posted grievances on different social media platforms about increasing prices of basic food items, while some also found complaining about grocery stores running out of their stocks (Singh et al., 2018). Nowadays, individuals are more interested in sharing facts and reviews on social media (Viviani & Pasi, 2017), and during COVID-19 people become more restless by watching social media posts and started to stock supplies (Bitkina & Park, 2021). By watching trend of stocking supplies, many stores like Wal-Mart and Costco put limits on how much groceries can an individual buy to prevent the shortage, but buyers came up with the view that they are following the lockdown measures, and for that reason they are stocking supplies (Bhat et al., 2020). As, social media Networks ; Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram offers the option of uploading pictures, videos, locations and tagging options, consumers uploaded their encounters during COVID-19, which also lead to frenzy behavior of buyers (Szymkowiak et al., 2021).

As more and more people join social media channels and make their profiles on these platforms, it becomes possible for the brand marketers to obtain demographical details and other insights regarding customer's preferences, demographics and purchasing habits (Vithayathil et al., 2020). Data about online buying behavior in normal situations is easily available, but only few studies are available in the time of crisis or pandemic situations. As Addo et al. (2020) added that social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have influenced consumers buying behaviors a lot during the COVID-19. It is important to study the buying behaviors of individuals especially when they are bound to buy from online platforms (Gao et al., 2020). Current study intends to study about such buying behaviors that buyers adopted during the

COVID-19. It is also the need of the hour to investigate such buying behaviors when people have to avoid social contact (Ahmad & Murad, 2020). This research will expect to study different hypothesis about how social media influenced the frenzy behavior of the consumers. Also, this study will also explore about the decisions made by the consumers in which they avoided online purchases and prefer to purchase from their favorite store physically.

This inquiry is aimed at evaluating the impact of aforementioned social media channels on the purchase behavior of customers. The study also discusses the role of global pandemic in this entire relationship by gathering insights about customer's behavior before and after the pandemic. The main concern that has been tested in this study is that customer began to spend more time on social media channels during the lockdown situations. So, it is need of the hour to investigate the influence of these channels on customers buying behaviors during the pandemic. The primary question of this study is as follows:

What is the difference between the impact of social platforms on purchase behavior of the customers before and after global pandemic?

The primary objective of this study is:

- To ascertain the variations in relationship between social platforms and buying behavior of the consumers
- To compare the nature of relationship between consumer behavior and social platforms before and during global pandemic

## Literature Review

Laato et al. (2020) found that impact of COVID-19 is underestimated in terms of multiple aspects of consumer behavior that remarkably lead the individual's decision making process for searching and purchasing products online. Situational crisis that emerged from corona virus actually created an opportunity to comprehend the consumer's response mechanism (Chapman & Karau, 2023), for dealing with the vulnerability that is typically associated with the negative aspects of social interactions and physical shopping (Ahmad & Murad, 2020; Gao et al., 2020). Role of different online community platforms and virtual social channels has already gained much more importance in the marketing studies because of different reasons, but there is a lack of scholarly perspectives regarding the transitional differences

of this impact that grow after global crisis such as COVID-19 (Vlados & Chatzinikolaou, 2022).

According to Thota (2018) use of social media platforms has increased in the past few years because of enhanced features and options of social media that are beyond just social interactions and sharing updates. Monica and Balas (2014) found that social media platforms actively track the technological interventions that are particular to consumer demand and global business models in order to facilitate the interactions between customers and businesses. COVID-19 has actually played the role of catalyst (Karaosman et al., 2023), that significantly enhanced the user's reliance on social media channels for exploiting these features such as searching and purchasing required products online during the lockdowns (Bruggemann & Olbrich, 2023). The theoretical justification of increased use of social media also stems from the theory of cognitive absorption that guides the users' interactive capacity to be engaged with technological innovation for ensuring convenience and fast-paced problem solving approach (Oschinsky, 2022). Moreover, enhanced features of social media networks also make sure users personal security and privacy while searching products and making purchase decisions online (Tran, 2020). All these features together have devised a sense of joy, control, and easy approach to a lot of products that are not easily accessible during physical visits to markets and retail shops (Kadam & Atre, 2020).

### **Linking the Social Platforms with the Purchase behavior of Individuals**

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The role of social media platforms as an active communication tool between businesses and consumers has been validated by different research studies (Garg et al., 2019). Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are among the most recognized marketing and advertisement platforms that are not only used for disseminating the marketing messages of brands but also enable marketers to perform a thorough evaluation of users and target audience on the basis of numerous demographical factors and psychographic metrics (Yogesh & Yesha, 2014). Specifically, Facebook is acknowledged as the most advanced marketing medium that provides demographical insights about the users in order to facilitate the segmenting and targeting needs of marketing managers (Kim, 2020; Akar, 2021). Besides, gathering customer related data and information was never this much convenient as Facebook and

Instagram have aided the businesses to closely observe varying social and psychological preferences of the customers (Eichstaedt et al., 2021). Conversely, these platforms also facilitate the customer's appetite for searching different alternatives and evaluating the best product among these alternatives on the basis of real-time consumer generated content and reviews (Buhalis et al., 2023). Conventional advertisement tactics are becoming redundant because of one-way marketing communication as television commercials and printed marketing brochures don't actively incorporate the customers' perspective about a particular product (Blakeman, 2023). Consumer generated content that generally circumscribes reviews and feedback posted on the social media channels of brands provides an entirely different support to customer's decision making process and enables them to make wise decisions (Sykora et al., 2022).

### **Differences in Purchase behavior before and after COVID-19 Outbreak**

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Sheth (2020) states that social media is already leading the ecommerce trends in the business world because of 24/7 availability of required information about different products being manufactured and sold around the globe. Typical differences in online purchase behavior before and after COVID-19 can be related with the enhanced scope of social media branding that was missing in many cases. According to (Das et al., 2020) popular brands that were already practicing smart social media strategies have figured out that because of social distancing enforcements and lockdowns, the number of online traffic on their e-commerce stores surpassed all the previous records. Bhatti et al. (2020) argued that COVID-19 can be attributed to a paradigm shift that really transformed the customer's decision making process after carefully reviewing plenty of alternatives online and then selecting the best product among a number of substitutes.

In the context of UK, the impact drawn by online community platforms on the buying behavior can be clearly distinguished in both contexts before and after COVID-19 (Chan, 2022). Most importantly, all the renowned social media platforms have included new features such as local updates on COVID-19, enhanced e-commerce experiences including pre-sales and post-sales services, and smart payment mechanisms for facilitating the global audience (Li et al., 2021). It has also observed that mobility restrictions have

created an urge in customers to search information online on social media platforms about different products and to make purchase decisions (Pop, 2022). This urge doesn't only help customers to get the information they want but also created an opportunity for the different brands to market and sell their products through online mediums.

Chawla and Kumar (2022) argued that mobile friendly e-commerce trends are among the most significant reasons that ensure customer's reliance on online shopping. Interactive e-commerce stores and selling platforms, multiple options for making payments and product deliveries, complete trackable lists of searched and purchased items, and management of finances at the end of customers are the significant factors that shape the online consumer behavior. According to (Jayasankaraprasad, 2023) majority of the online shoppers value convenience and time-saving capacity of online purchases because these users mostly belong to educated social class that priorities ease and efficiency over finances. Moreover, countless options regarding different products and brands add more value to online purchase decisions because customers can easily switch different channels and websites to observe and evaluate multiple interrelated substitutes (Iriani & Andjarwati, 2020). It is also worth mentioning that popular tech savvy brands have also exploited customer relationships to attract and captivate the attention of their existing customer base through effective loyalty programs in order to successfully run the online stores. With the help of these programs, brands have practically utilized the application of "Stimuli Organism Response" (SOR) theory that denotes the importance of internal stimulation for responding towards an external event or opportunity (Gupta et al., 2023). Hobbs (2020) states that restrictions and negative compulsion of COVID-19 outbreak have also acted as positive stimulators for

increasing the impact of social media channels on online purchase intention of customers as people forcefully started to trust the e-commerce channels and online marketplaces but later on realized the positive consequences of making online purchases.

### The S-O-R Theory

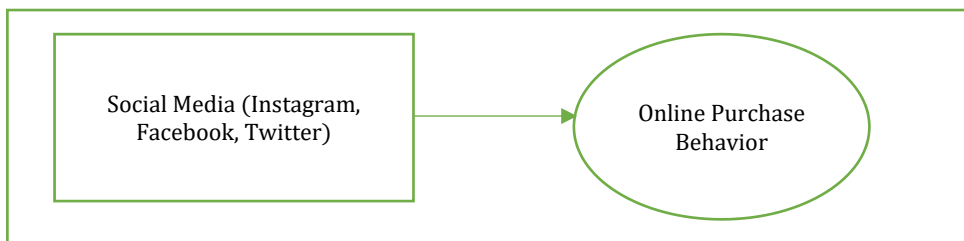
The relevance of SOR theory with the phenomenon being investigated in this study emerges from the arguments of Mehrabian and Russel (1974) that describe the relation between external environmental conditions and internal response system of humans based on social and cognitive personality factors. Variations in the purchasing intentions of individuals are also connected with the assertions of SOR theory that validate the effective nature of social, economic, and technological stimulators that affect the consumer's decision making process. According to Chen (2023) paradigm shift of online shopping and e-commerce marketplaces is strongly influenced by the SOR theory where companies keep on evaluating numerous social and psychological factors in order to facilitate the related needs of customers.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is presented in the following figure where use of prescribed social media platforms is depicted as independent variables that directly affect the online purchase behavior of customers. The current study tries to test two hypotheses that are also mentioned below:

- H1:** The use of social media is congruent with the consumer behavior to make online purchases more often.
- H0:** The use of social media is not congruent with the consumer behavior to make online purchases more often.

Figure 1



## Methodology

The methodology of this research study is defined as per the guidelines established in research on (Saunders et al., 2007; Melnikovas, 2018). This methodology follows the assertions of positivism as research paradigm that capitalizes on the objective nature of the reality (Deely, 2009). Lyon et al. (2015) also support that positivism focuses on the quantifiable factors of reality that can be closely evaluated and testified with the help of data collection and statistical analysis of gathered data. Based on the philosophical preferences of the study, deductive research strategy is followed for collecting and analyzing the data on the subject area for the purpose of hypothesis testing. With the help of this strategy, the complete process of research enabled the researchers to investigate the nature of connection between role of social media and consumer's online purchase behavior and it also helped in evaluating the differences of this connection in pre COVID-19 and post COVID-19 periods.

## Research Design

For the purpose of data collection, the general population of this study is defined as the citizens of UK without considering the social and professional status of the respondents. According to Kelly et al. (2018) the use of social media networks is common in almost all the individuals that are over the age of 18 that provides sound basis for considering the target audience of this study are the people who are 18 years or old. Although simplistic consideration resulted in a greater population that required appropriate sampling frame in order to ensure the generalizability of the research (Duff, 2006). Researchers have gathered the data from 100 individuals with the help of online questionnaire surveys. For developing a sampling frame, researchers have performed a preliminary analysis of social media users that are found active on the social media pages of different brands. Simple random sampling technique is used to finalize the 100 individuals where different accumulated details in sampling frame helped the researchers to reach out the potential research participants for this study (Noor et al., 2022). The reason for selecting the active social media users who have posted feedbacks on social media networks of different brands was to ensure the familiarity of the respondents with the online shopping channels. The gathered results in the form of surveys underwent different statistical

tests such as correlation and regression (Mandel, 2012). In order to observe the significant changes the independent variable drawn on the dependent variable in the different given scenarios, analysis of regression has been utilized to observe the degree of variations.

Online questionnaire used in this study comprised different kinds of questions that were related to the demographics of the respondents, online purchase decisions, and reasons for variations in the purchase decisions before and after COVID-19. For evaluating the responses relevant to online purchase decisions and variations in these decisions, a five point Likert scale is used for categorizing the responses from the research participants where 1 is used for the strongly disagree option while 5 is used for the strongly agree option. The independent variable or predictor of this study is the role of social media which is incorporated in the questionnaire as per the scales established by Yadav and Rahman (2017). This scale reflects 6 different constructs that can be used to demonstrate the presence of social media in daily routine of the respondents and it also circumscribes questions regarding active content sharing, posting, and researching across social media channels. Conversely, online buying behavior of the customers is denoted as the dependent variable that is measured with the help of scale developed by Mason et al. (2021). The variations in online buying behavior are observed and evaluated in order to confirm that there are differences of magnitude of impact where before the global pandemic, consumer's readiness to make online purchase is relatively less than in the situation after global pandemic.

## Data Analysis

For measuring the reliability of the data collection instrument, items of the questionnaire survey underwent the test of reliability that showed the value of Cronbach's Alpha as 0.79 that confirms the reliability of instrument.

It is assumed that demographics of the respondents draw impact on the average responses that are obtained from the participants (Datta et al., 2002). The percentage of male respondents was accounted for 67 and 33 for female. Among all the participants of this study, twelve respondents are from the first age group "18 to 24", 33 participants are from the range of "25 to 29", 36 respondents are from the age group of "30 to 34" years, while 19 respondents are from the

age range of “35 to 39”. Belongingness of respondents with different age brackets enhances the credibility and generalizability of the results obtained in this study (Sauer et al., 2011). The items used in questionnaire have also obtained data regarding income and education status of the respondents. Among all 100 participants of this study, 27 percent belonged to the student class, 49 percent belonged to the salaried class, while 24 percent respondents marked business activity as their source of income. The status of education is classified as undergraduates and graduates as among the total respondents, 24 percent have indicated that they are currently enrolled in undergraduate programs while 76 percent respondents market their educational status as graduates. In order to ensure the active usage and engagement with social media platforms, questionnaire also encompassed relevant items, results of which showed that 94 percent of the total respondents have been directly engaged in online purchase activity while seeking information about a particular product using their social media accounts.

The results of regression analysis indicate the magnitude of differences and variations between two variables as two different contexts have been evaluated in this study. The results indicate the significant dependence of dependent variable (online buying behavior) on the independent variable (social media) in both situations before and after peak times of COVID-19. The comparative analysis of this relationship in both situations also highlights the differences of magnitude of impact as before Covid-19, the value for regression is found to be 571.881 while the residual value remained 571.411 (Table 1). On the other hand, during and after the peak times of COVID-19, the results indicate that increased reliance of users on social media positively manipulated the existing results as the sum reflected an increase from 571.881 to 851.301 while maintaining the degree of freedom as 1. The other values of the table have also increased after the mobility restrictions and enforcements relevant to COVID-19 started to impact the routine life of customers (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Regression Analysis.*

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>										
Before COVID-19					After COVID-19					
Description	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	571.881	1	571.881			851.301	1	851.301		
Residual	571.411	98	5.799	98.143	.000 <sup>b</sup>	520.513	98	5.400	160.004	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Total	1143.292	99				1371.814	99			

*Dependent Variable: Consumer Buying Behavior (CBB).*

*Predictors: Social Media Management (SMM).*

In the following table (Table.2) results of analysis are indicating that in both scenarios, social platforms draw a positive impact on purchase intention of users although the nature of this impact is considerably higher in the second scenario. Before the global outbreak, B value for social media is calculated as 0.509 with the standard error of 0.052. It further showed beta value and t-value around 0.699 and 9.872 respectively. Conversely, during and after peak times of COVID-19, an increase in B value is noted

that is calculated as .619 with a decreased value of standard error. The results demonstrate that aforementioned social platforms possess a positive degree of relative impact on purchase intention in all scenarios but multiple implications and restrictions that are associated with the global pandemic and subsequent regulatory enforcements, this relativity gets higher because of the increased reliance of user for collecting information and making purchases through online platforms.

**Table 2**

*Coefficients of Regression Analysis*

<b>Coefficients</b>										
<b>Before COVID-19</b>						<b>After COVID-19</b>				
	<b>Unstandardized Coefficients</b>		<b>Std. Coeff</b>			<b>Unstandardized Coefficients</b>		<b>Std. Coeff</b>		
	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Constant	3.339	0.944		3.64	.000	2.401	.902		2.599	.011
SMM	0.509	0.052	0.699	9.872	.000	.619	.049	.787	12.599	.000

*Dependent Variable: Consumer Buying Behavior.*

## **Discussion**

The results of this study have validated the results of different other studies on connection between social media and online purchase intention of customers that use of social media always positively correlates with an increased extent of making online purchases (Sultana & Vasantha, 2020; Mason et al., 2021; Miah et al., 2022). Aggarwal and Rahul (2017) also refer to the active presence of different brands on social media for exploiting the opportunities that exist on social media and World Wide Web from a business perspective. But the actual value that this adds to the existing literature is the corresponding perspective where mobility restrictions and social distancing that are associated to the peak-times of COVID-19 have been proved as moderators to increase the significance of this relationship between social media and online purchase behavior of customers. Previously explained concept of SOR theory is also validated with the findings of this study where social presence of any business can be used to gain the maximum advantage with the help of internal stimulation during the times of crisis like COVID-19 (Gabriella et al., 2021). The findings of this study provide directions for the global companies that how technology and globalized solutions can be used to transform the online purchase behavior of the customers in accordance with the assertions of SOR theory. According to Laato et al. (2020) the most suitable factors that are reflected through the explanations of SOR theory are revision intention of customers and inclination to share experiences as a result of internal stimulation. These factors multiply the impact of brand's efforts to promote and advertise their products online.

The validation of results of existing research studies that are closely relevant to the topic area

also comes from the facts that social anxiety and perceived isolation in customers draw joint effects on online purchase behavior of customers (Elisa et al., 2022). Different models of SOR theory project the same consequences as found in this study that when customers realize the limitations regarding physical visits to retail stores and mobility restrictions; they tend to utilize other suitable options and alternatives that might fulfill their routine requirements pertaining to shopping and purchasing. According to Zhang et al. (2023) upsurge of online purchase intention among individuals during global pandemic is keenly associated with the concept of personal safety and self-care as different participants of this study highlighted the fact that they prefer to gather information online about their favorite products instead of paying a physical visit during such a health crisis.

Zheng et al. (2020) states that purchase intention of consumer behavior strongly depend on extrinsic environmental factors where free will of customers and open environmental conditions are ample for customers to make purchase decision. In case, if a customer is aware of external factors that put limits to the physical shopping; his willingness and ability to purchase a certain product would eventually decrease. Majority of the brands that have exploited the online opportunities during the peak-times of COVID-19, actually influenced the internal stimulation of the customers by highlighting the positive aspects associated to the online shopping (Purwanto et al., 2022). Besides that, brands have also affected the purchase behavior of the customers by providing instant online customer support and extraordinary e-commerce platform assistance by enhancing the flexibility of mediums and increasing the platform functionality that is important to ensure user's convenience.

## Hypothesis Testing

The findings of this study testified the assertions made in the first hypothesis of this study where use of different social media platforms is assumed as a positive impact factor for online purchase behavior of the customers. Results of regression analysis have also validated the findings of study conducted by Shenge et al. (2021) where researchers discovered that in the post COVID-19 environment, customers are more concerned with saving their time and making online purchases in order to minimize the deterrence in their personal lives. The differences of regression factor and residual values have indicated that positive correlation between social media and online purchase intention is obvious yet subject to the increased performance of impact of independent variable on the dependent variable (Kumari & Yadav, 2018). Positive shifts in the consumer behavior also exist in the same direction that means during and after the peak-times of COVID-19, social media started to influence more people to search and purchase products online (Miah et al., 2022).

The results of correlation analysis have also indicated the strong positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Comparative results of correlation have projected an increase of 0.81 in the value of Pearson Correlation factor as significance of relationship between social media and online purchase behavior of customers was estimated as 0.706 before the pandemic but after the pandemic this value increased and calculated as 0.787. In another study, Samet (2020) has also indicated that brands with online presence on web and social media have reported an extravagant increase in the number of online visitors during the peak times of COVID-19. According to Ahmad and Murad (2020) there are numerous other factors that parallel affect the purchase intention of online customers such as lack of physical touch and uncertainty but brands can minimize these fears and insecurities with the help of user generated content, customer reviews and feedbacks, and a convenient ecommerce platform interface. According to Kumar et al. (2020) increased reliance of customers on social media and online retail channels is also because of consistent marketing campaigns and social media promotions.

Given the detailed context of the topic and findings of this study, the status of hypothesis testing is as follows:

**H1:** The use of social media is congruent with the

consumer behavior to make online purchases more often accepted.

**H0:** The use of social media is not congruent with the consumer behavior to make online purchases more often rejected.

## Conclusion

Conclusively, it can be said that different social media platforms have performed a very positive and significant role for the global business sector during the peak times of pandemic. Restrictions on mobility, enforcements such as social distancing, and closure of physical retail outlets of brands have modified the existing online purchase behavior of customers. It does not only transform the customer's perception of online shopping and selecting alternatives across different virtual platforms but it has also made the businesses and brands to enhance the functionality and features of online e-commerce platforms. Akar (2021) also stated that results of survey study revealed that purchase behavior of customers is strongly influenced by the increased functionality of online selling platforms and constant customer support services. During the peak-times of global pandemic, more than 80 percent of online visitors were converted and they have purchase one or more products from online shopping channels in UK (Mukhtar & Gotmare, 2020).

Theoretically, results of this study imply the significant connection between assertions provided in different models of SOR and online purchase behavior of customers. Socioeconomic implications of global pandemic are proved as an external stimulator that directly impacted the internal stimuli of customers and transform their purchase behavior whereas role of social media has been found as the mediating factor that can be used by the brands to increase customer's reliance on information and alternatives available online (Laato et al., 2020). Different studies have also figured out multiple visible and invisible factors that are typically associated with the brands and influence the purchase behavior of customers. These factors might include but are not limited to appealing promotions on social media, responsive customer feedback mechanism, flexible and convenient user interface of online selling channels, expressing layout of consumer generated content, and quality of the products purchased online, and multiple payment gateways that enable the global customers to buy any product from their favorite online store regardless of their locations.

Future directions for expanded understanding of the connection between social media platforms and consumer purchase behavior may include qualitative inquiries for deeply investigating the consumer perspective. This is also a potential limitation in this study where limited insights on online shopping and role of social media are gathered from the research participants. In addition to this, future research might focus on

different external environmental factors and technological events instead of focusing on the similar global crisis that is focused in this study. It would enable the researchers to find out and explain the broader implications of technological communication, social media, and online shopping trends that do not completely depend on environmental casualties.

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