

## **Original Research Article**

### **FROM NORMAL TO A NEW NORMAL: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN CONSUMER'S APPAREL PURCHASE BEHAVIOR DURING COVID**

#### **ABSTRACT**

COVID-19 caused by a novel coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2, was reported in December 2019 which equitably brought the entire world to a standstill, affecting the market, consumer demand, purchase decisions and the global supply chain. A critical situation pushes human behaviour in different directions, and COVID 19 is one such situation that is not normal. To control the spread of disease, all the countries including India imposed the lockdown, resulting in market stagnation, economic instabilities and changes in consumers' purchasing patterns related to various products. The present study investigates the consumers' behavioural intentions amid COVID-19 in the context of apparel. The present study attempts to identify the clothing preferences of consumers during the pandemic by exploring the factors responsible/playing a crucial role while buying clothing during the COVID pandemic by examining the links between consumer buying behaviour of apparel during normal times and in crisis or pandemic by elaborate literature as well as consumer survey. The research helped understand consumers' clothing type preferences as well as their sources of information on latest fashion trends during Covid. Other factors that play a crucial role in buying clothing during COVID were also explored by the researchers. The results revealed that online shopping had a positive influence during the pandemic, with social media being the biggest influencer for the latest fashion trends. "Work from home" during lockdown leads to the comfort factor playing a major role while purchasing apparel. Consumer sentiments were also explored in the study and it was found that consumers visit less to malls and prefer online purchases due to contactless shopping. They enjoy online shopping because of its ease and convenience.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, consumer buying behaviour, online shopping, purchase decision, social media

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In late December 2019, a pneumonia outbreak of unknown etiology took place in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, and spread quickly nationwide. Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC) identified a novel beta-coronavirus called 2019-nCoV, now officially known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Gorbalenya et al., 2020), that is responsible for the pandemic. This was the third zoonotic coronavirus breakout in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that allowed human-to-human transmission and raised global health concerns. The pandemic escalated exponentially at the beginning of 2020, which might only be the tip of the iceberg due to delayed case reporting and deficiency in testing kits (Li et al., 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way we work, shop, and communicate with people more than any other disruption (including technological ones) in the recent past. As more people start working from home, they are sticking to basics, stepping outside only to buy

essentials, and are constantly worried about the risks of getting infected in crowded places like malls and supermarkets.

The coronavirus crisis has left a mark across all industries. Fashion, with its non-essential product lines, has been especially hard hit, and, unfortunately, many will not be able to repair the damage and recover. This is part of a new reality within the fashion industry. There will be winners and losers. Some companies in the industry are better positioned to cope due to their stronger foundations, while many are at risk of disappearing. The group of winners will consist of enterprises that can respond to the current challenges while capturing the necessary trends. As economies open slowly, those who survive will be the ones who realize that the fashion industry will have a new normal and adapt their strategies accordingly.

The post-pandemic consumer will be different. While it is no surprise that more shopping will be online, consumers will also have different expectations from their shopping experiences. For instance, people will be buying more casual and comfortable clothing, as remote work assumes a greater role for many employees. Merchandising and supply chains will need an adjustment (Ledesma, 2020).

In the longer run, the COVID-19 recovery is likely to result in a more permanent shift in consumers' attitudes and shopping behaviour, especially in urban areas, with increased usage of home and personal hygiene products and an accelerated shift to digital purchases (Chauhan & Shah, 2020). In the backdrop of the above discussion, this study was conducted to identify the clothing preferences of consumers during the pandemic, and researchers have explored the factors responsible/playing a crucial role while buying clothing during the COVID pandemic. The researcher also tried to find out the emotions of consumers while purchasing during the pandemic.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Impact of COVID 19 on the Apparel sector***

The Indian textiles sector has been one of the worst-hit sectors due to the COVID-19 crisis. The Indian textile sector is besotted with issues such as lack of technology upgradation, inefficient infrastructure, fragmented industry structure, sluggish demand in major export markets like the USA and the EU due to the vestigial impact of the Global Financial Crisis and rising competition from countries such as Vietnam, Bangladesh, China and Turkey in areas such as apparels, cotton fabric and carpets (Anthony & Joseph, 2014; Dhiman & Sharma, 2017; Kathuria, 2013, 2018; Kumar, 2001). All these factors only sought to provide a weak foundation to the sector when it came to weathering the storm of COVID-19 that further complicated the overall impact on this already beleaguered sector.

Perhaps one of the foremost immediate effects of COVID-19 on the Indian textiles industry has been the slump in sales due to widespread mandatory salesrooms closures. With sellers and potential customers following strict social distancing norms, the most proximate impact of this crisis has been on the overall sales of textiles and clothing. Arguments are being made as to the efficacy of online retail in such times. However, during such crises, with 'non-essential' goods and services debarred from being transacted through online retail, the option of online trades may not seem to be that viable an alternative that could salvage the sector from its crisis of plunging sales (Majumdar et al., 2020).

### ***Factor influential in consumers' purchasing behavior***

Globalization and increasing competition, and short product life cycles in fashion retailing, have affected consumer behavior. The factors that make consumers purchase particular products in the field of clothing, a field that nowadays has taken on multiple personal and social aspects that go beyond simple needs, are many and various and are influenced by diverse variables. When consumers make decisions about what clothing to buy they are influenced to a significant degree as much by the information they have been given by fashion, branding, and marketing activities as they are by individual, psychological and social factors. In addition, such values as price, brand, quality, aesthetic value, and usage characteristics present themselves as influencing qualities. The importance and degree of priority that these values hold for people constitute the differences in clothing purchasing behavior. To survive in the fashion industry, consumer behavior is vital for manufacturers and retailers to develop and leverage core marketing capabilities.

According to Kholiya et al., (2022) there was no relationship between age and gender with frequency of purchasing apparel. However, the psychological and financial limitations also occurred as major factors for the decrease in purchasing apparel during Covid-19. Another factor influential in consumers' purchasing behavior is the socio-cultural factor, which includes family, group, social class, peers, and cultural makeup. It can be easily observed in everyday life that the culture and values encompassing all the factors giving direction to individuals' thoughts, behavior, and attitudes do affect consumers' awareness of fashion and brand names and that similarly, individuals from different social classes possess different opinions with respect to fashion and brand name products in their clothing purchasing behavior (Koca & Koc, 2016).

According to Li and Zhang (2002), there are in-depth studies on online shopping attitudes and behavior in recent years where most of them have attempted to identify factors influencing or contributing to online shopping attitudes and behavior. Among the factors influencing online shopping that has been highlighted by these researchers are convenience, time-saving, ease of use, nature of products, competitive price, and trust in online shopping.

### ***2.3 Impact of COVID 19 on the online purchase decision of apparel***

The advancements in the internet have generated a new section of customers in the form of online consumers, who now play a pivotal role in the e-commerce world and it is constantly growing, especially in terms of the online clothing industry. The online clothing businesses have seen a considerable rise in recent times, with a high and growing demand. The internet has created a revolutionary impact in everyday communications and transactions. It is considered the fastest-growing mode used to shop. Online shopping is a fast and efficient way for consumers to purchase products and services. The internet also allows consumers to access an unlimited range of products and services from companies around the world, and it has reduced the time and effort consumers spend on shopping (Ko et al., 2004 and Lim, et al., 2010).

The COVID-19 crisis has forced consumers to change their shopping habits rapidly, pushing many to either increase their online spending or try shopping online for the first time. Although eCommerce has steadily been on the rise for many years, this is the first time we have seen such a sudden and widespread shift from shopping at brick-and-mortar stores to shopping online. The outbreak has made eCommerce a far more central part of consumers' shopping habits than it was previously. Although most respondents had already made some purchases online, the crisis pushed them to boost their online shopping – while also encouraging a significant number of them to turn to eCommerce for the first time.

Consumers' perceptions towards online shopping have been broadly researched by various researchers and scholars with a wide range of methods to compare consumer behavior in online shopping to that of traditional offline shopping behavior (Gupta, 2013).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A convenience method of sampling was adopted and accordingly, primary data was collected by surveying people from different zones of the country. Primary data was collected from Indian working employees during the summer of 2021. A structured non-disguised questionnaire was prepared and then administered as a Google Form. The link of this Google Form was shared with the working employees as respondents. Out of a total 200 responses received, 196 were found fit for the analysis. From among the total respondents surveyed, more than half of the respondents were from the north zone of India (56%), followed by the west zone (24%) and east zone (12.2%), whereas very few respondents were from the south, central, and northeast zones (Table 1).

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. In the first section questions related to demographic attributes like age, gender, income, etc. were asked from the respondents. The second section of the questionnaire consisted of questions related to clothing preferences during the pandemic, sources of information about the latest fashion trends during covid, and factors playing a crucial role while purchasing apparel during crises or pandemic times. The third part of the questionnaire was framed to get the emotions of the respondents regarding their purchase of apparel in not normal condition i.e. during the pandemic. This was measured by using 5 points Likert scale anchored with (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree.

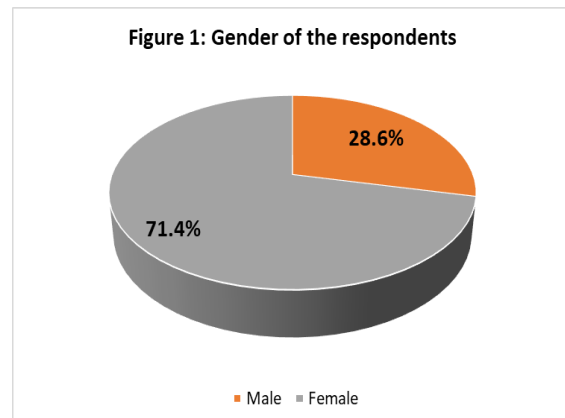
The questionnaire was pilot tested. We removed ambiguous and difficult questions to enhance the clarity of the reasons, factors and to minimize confusion. Finally, statistical remedies after data collection were also undertaken to compile the data.

## RESULTS And DISCUSSION

### *Sample Characteristics*

The demographic profile depicts that from 196 respondents, 71.4% female and 28.6% male participated in the study (Figure 1). Of the respondents, more than half of the respondents were from Gen Y (1977-1995), i.e., 54.6% were between the ages of 26-45 years, while the second majority of the samples, i.e., 27.6%, were from Gen Z (1995-2010). Around 16.3% of the respondents were from Gen X (1965-1976), and only 1.5% were between 56-75 years of age, i.e., Baby Boomers (1946–1965). So, it may be concluded that the respondents who took up the survey were mainly as young as in their 20's and elder by their late 50's. The reason may be that the survey was conducted online, and the respondents in this age group are more friendly with online digital ways.

The data presented in Table 1 revealed that most of the respondents were graduates (40.3%) and almost similar number of respondents were having Master degree (41.8%) as well. Only 15.3% of the respondents were doctorate (Ph.D.), and significantly fewer are diploma holders, i.e., 2.6%. The consumer's income is one of the detrimental factors in consumer purchase behaviour. The data indicate that 39.3% of the respondents in the sample population have less than Rs. 30,000 monthly incomes. Around thirty percent had a



monthly income of more than Rs. 60,000 while the remaining 30.6% of respondents reported having a monthly income that falls between 30,000-60,000 rupees.

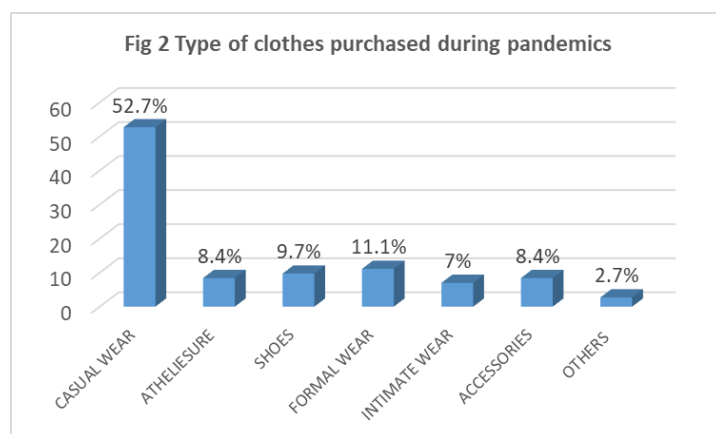
**Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

**n=196**

| Variable                     | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| <b>Age</b>                   |           |                |
| Baby Boomers (1946 – 1965)   | 3         | 1.5            |
| Gen X (1965 – 1976)          | 32        | 16.3           |
| Gen Y (1977 – 1995)          | 107       | 54.6           |
| Gen Z (1995 – 2010)          | 54        | 27.6           |
| <b>Geographical Location</b> |           |                |
| North Zone                   | 110       | 56.0           |
| East Zone                    | 24        | 12.2           |
| West Zone                    | 47        | 24             |
| South Zone                   | 5         | 2.6            |
| Central Zone                 | 5         | 2.6            |
| North East Zone              | 5         | 2.6            |
| <b>Education</b>             |           |                |
| Diploma                      | 5         | 2.6            |
| Bachelor's degree            | 79        | 40.3           |
| Master's Degree              | 82        | 41.8           |
| Ph.D.                        | 30        | 15.3           |
| <b>Monthly Income</b>        |           |                |
| Less than 30000 (INR)        | 77        | 39.3           |
| 30000-40000 (INR)            | 20        | 10.2           |
| 40000-50000 (INR)            | 19        | 9.7            |
| 50000-60000 (INR)            | 21        | 10.7           |
| More than 60000 (INR)        | 59        | 30.1           |

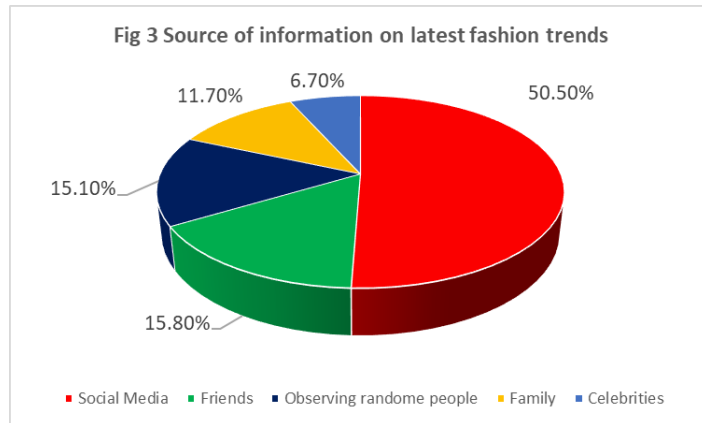
**Type of clothing purchased during the pandemic**

Out of total 196 working people, the majority i.e. 52.7% (Figure 2) reported that they purchased casual wear clothes during the pandemic. Formal wear clothing purchase was done by 11.1% only followed by shoes (9.7%), athleisure and accessories (8.4% each). The results indicate that during lockdown due to the closure of companies, schools, etc. the “work from home” culture inclined people choice towards comfort casual clothes.



**Source of Information on Latest fashion trends**

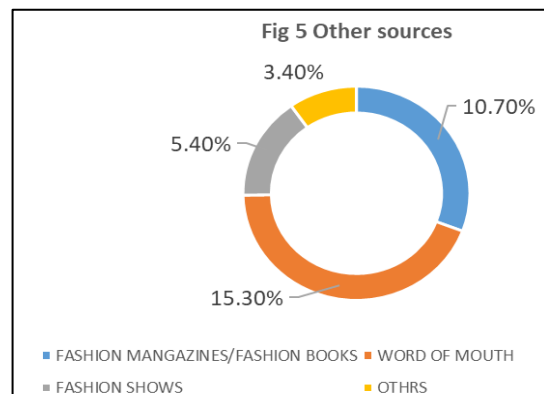
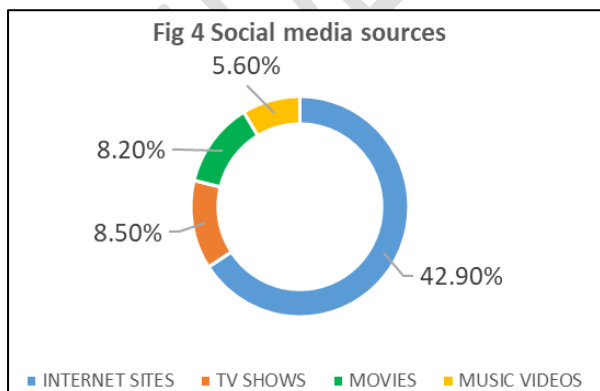
It was evident from Figure 3 that approximately fifty percent of the respondents get to know about the latest fashion trends from social media including messaging sites as well as online shopping sites. It has also previously been reported that due to pandemic lockdown and social distancing people preferred to shop for apparel through online mode (Kholiya et al., 2021). With the restrictions on movement and stay-at-home orders in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms have become an outlet for users to express their concerns, feelings, and opinions about the pandemic, as well as to share their new consumption practices (Depoux et al., 2020). Thus, people are searching more on social media and online sites for information. Only 15% of the respondent's source of information was friends and observing random people. Surprisingly, a smaller number of respondents i.e. 6.7% only got inspired by celebrities for the latest fashion trends. The reason may be that celebrity clothes are not designed according to the comfort zone of middle-class people.



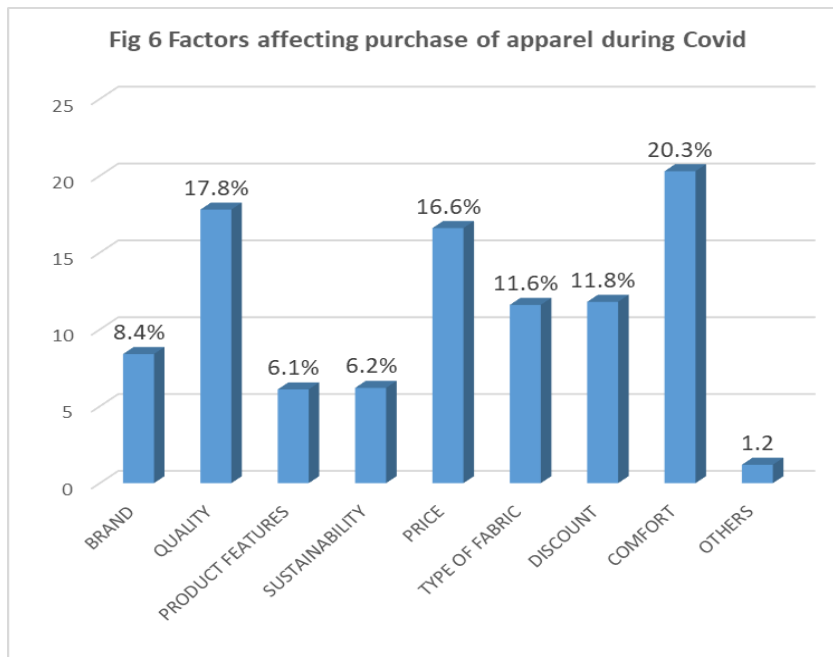
***Social media and other sources for information on the latest fashion trends***

Social media has the largest impact on the respondents regarding the latest fashion trends. On exploring further, the results show that internet sites are the most popular social media i.e. 42.9% rely on these sites for the latest fashion trends whereas approximately eight percent of respondents' source of information was from television shows and movies. Only 5.6% rely on music videos for fashion-related trends (Figure 4).

The respondent's other sources of getting information apart from social media show that they are influenced by word of mouth communication (15.3%) followed by fashion magazines and fashion books (10.7%). Only 5.4% of respondents said that they get information about the latest trends from fashion shows. (Figure 5).



### ***Factors playing a crucial role while purchasing apparels during Covid times***

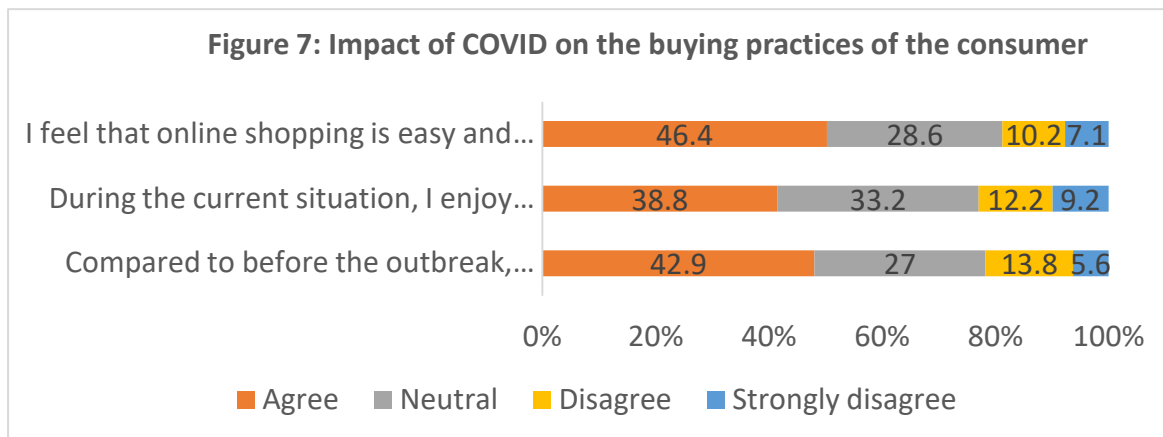


Previous studies done on the selection of clothing reported that clothing should be easy to maintain, light in weight, soft, and simple to put on and take off. The type of clothing needed will also depend on the geographic condition and heating condition of the home. (Massey, S. and Jahan, S., 2011) The respondents gave multiple responses for the various factors affecting the purchase of apparel. It is clearly evident from

Figure 6 that comfort is the most crucial factor affecting the purchase of apparel during Covid times. The result is supported by the results of Fig 2 that people are more interested in buying casual wear clothes during the pandemic due to the “work from home” policy and comfort level of casual wear. Clothing consumption may also function as a buffer for consumers to deal with stressful external environments. For example, consumers switching to comfort clothing styles might be due to the need to feel relaxed or less stressed. (Liu, et al., 2021) Thus, comfort has given the highest percentage (20.3%) by the respondents followed by the quality of clothes (17.8%) and price (16.6%). Approximately equal percent of the respondents consider discounted clothes (11.8%) and fabric type (11.6%) as an important factors for the purchase of apparel during covid. The brand also plays an important role in purchasing apparel. However, sustainability issues (6.2%) and product features (6.1%) are considered as least important factors for choosing apparel during pandemics.

### ***Consumer concerns and sentiments during COVID***

The survey also tracked the consumer concern and sentiments during COVID 19 regarding the transformation in consumer behaviour before and during covid. The nature of the crisis and understanding the paradigm shift will play a great role in the success or failure of many manufacturing units, design houses, and other related units.

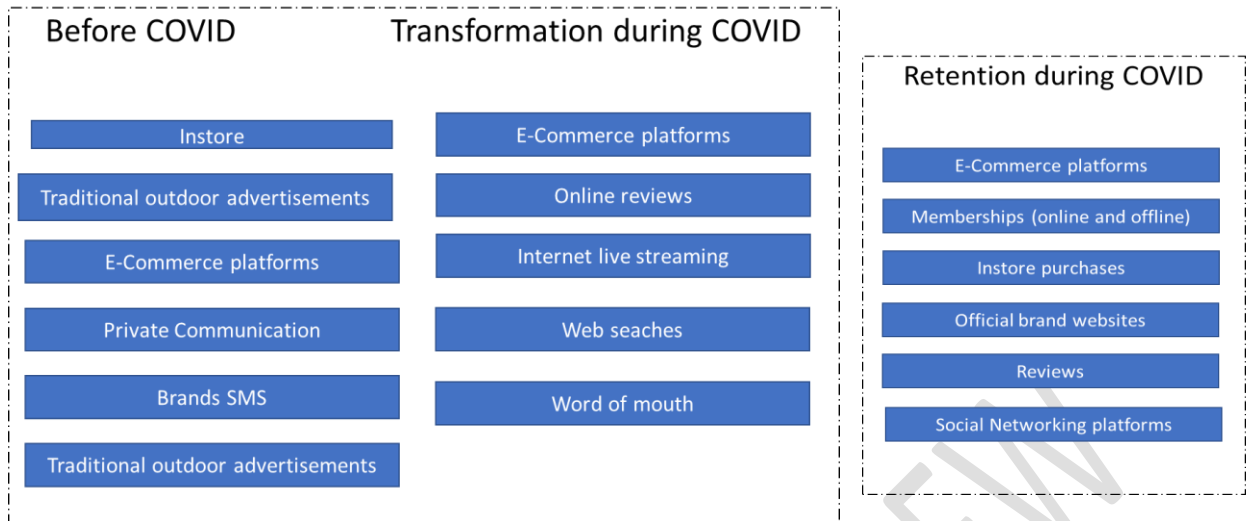


The survey reported that approximately 45% of the respondents agreed that due to lockdown and social distancing, there is a disruption in their regular buying practices. Their visits to the mall have reduced and they visit malls less often when compared before the outbreak of the pandemic. (Figure 7). However, one-fourth of the respondents i.e. 25% remained neutral when asked about the same. According to Kim and Im 2021 in their study investigated how contactless shopping grew as a protectionary action against COVID-19? The results confirmed that based on the protection motivation theory, consumers showed a dramatically increased interest in contactless shopping in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A large number of the respondents (42%) also agreed that purchases of apparel during the pandemic have reduced drastically (Figure 7). Mehta, et al., (2020) in their report on ‘Market Dynamics During COVID- 19: Indian Consumer Sentiments Analysis’ surveyed 1100 households across 15 cities and reported that during covid consumer’s planned purchases were deferred and new learning to live with less came into scenario. In general, across all industries, spending is assumed to be down due to the restrictions of lockdown as spending became limited. Moreover, due to this pandemic, the consumers are restricted to spend more and in the coming months, consumers are expecting that their household income might fall (Tyagi & Pabalkar, 2021).

The respondents also opined about their sentiments while shopping. During the current covid situation, nearly 38.8% of the respondents agreed that they enjoyed shopping online during the pandemic whereas 33.3.% respondents remained neutral on this aspect. This may be because online shopping attracts consumers as the same way as offline stores. Ha, et al., 2007 analyzed online Visual Merchandising features of 100 websites (US and Korean) selling apparel products. Their analysis revealed that many visual merchandising features and elements employed in offline stores were taken up online with some modifications. Another reason may be as reported by the 46.2% of the respondents stating that online shopping is easy and convenient (Figure 7). Only 7.1 % of the respondents disagreed with the statement.

Fig 8: Transformation during COVID 19



## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study reviewed the studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the apparel sector, factors affecting the purchasing decisions towards the apparel, and online shopping of apparel due to covid.

However, it is believed that the textile and apparel industry is one of the most hit by covid demarking consumer purchases into essential and nonessential goods. Apparel purchases during covid was influenced by the pandemic with limited buying volume in the case of apparel. However, potential customers opted for online shopping maintaining the physical distancing.

Consumers are more self-expressive than following fashion trends in purchasing apparel. They preferred more casual wear during the pandemic. Consumers were searching social media majorly for the latest fashion trends with online sites, one of the most popular social media. Communication always played a major role in dispersing information which is evident in this case also. The information about fashion trends after social media was transferred through "word of mouth". The purchasing decision of consumers was influenced by comfort. Price is also an important factor playing a crucial role in a purchase decisions. The nature of the crisis essentially shifted the channel of purchase of consumers from offline to online. However, the consumers were enjoying online shopping because of its ease and convenience.

The current study is considered stimulating for future research directions for academia and practitioners. It was found that designers, manufacturers, and sellers of textiles and apparel products especially online websites should be up to date with target consumer behavior, which is affected by several variables dependent on market and consumer. Further, we recommend developing marketing strategies for surrounding contactless shopping modes with convenience and speed. The consumer behavior model may also be revised and modified focussing on purchase decisions during the crisis periods.

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