

**IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ONLINE SHOPPING IN INDIA: A SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO APPAREL SECTOR**

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ABSTRACT

‘A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions’- Oliver Wendell Holmes.

The covid-19 pandemic has literally shaken the world. We still are under the effect of it. It has totally changed the way we live, the way we get educated and the way we do business. It has posed many challenges in front of us; however it has also come up with many opportunities. Every sector is greatly impacted by this unprecedented crisis.

This research paper discusses the impact of covid-19 on online shopping of apparels in India. E-commerce was rising at a good pace before pandemic, however, it saw a boom during and after the pandemic. This growth is expected to continue in the future.

The paper illustrates the change in buying habits of consumers, the change in their choices. The paper also discusses challenges and opportunities in front of online apparel sellers in India. It gives the overview of the changing dynamics of E-commerce market in India with special reference to apparel sector. The research is based on analysis of secondary data and also includes opinions and experiences of some online apparel sellers.

Keywords:- Online shopping, Covid-19 pandemic, Apparel sellers, India, E-commerce.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 Era:-

The world was hit by Covid-19 calamity in December 2019. It started in China and spread all over the world till March 2020. We also faced the first lockdown in March 2020. It was an unprecedented calamity. No one had clue what are we going to face. It was definitely disastrous.

The world stood still for a long time. Many people died across the world. Businesses were shut. The world economy was at its lowest. People had to stay at home and nobody knew when it will end.

Today also, it is not over. We are still living in covid-19 era. However, we are in a much better condition than 2020. Most of us are vaccinated and everything is coming back to normal.

The covid-19 era brought many challenges. However, it has also come up with many opportunities. It is rightly said that, ‘Every cloud has a silver lining’. In this case, the silver lining was ‘E-commerce boom’. It literally saw a boom as there was no any other option left.

Online shopping

‘Online’ or ‘Virtual shopping’ simply means buying products online or using internet. Online shopping is growing worldwide. The world is at a click away. Due to this, we can order products from anywhere across the world. It was not possible earlier. However, rise in E-commerce has definitely increased the degree of globalization. The world has become smaller and closer. It has opened up many opportunities. The sellers across the world can set up shops in this virtual world and cater to the customers worldwide with lower set up cost.

Online shopping in India

Talking about Indian context, people here also prefer online shopping due to low prices, discounts, more variety, comparison facility, time saving etc. Virtual shopping in urban areas of India is common ; but, it is also growing rapidly in semi-urban and rural areas. Brands and malls are not available in this area, so people prefer to buy brands online. High disposable income, change in lifestyle, awareness regarding technology, wave of globalization are some more reasons for preference for online shopping.

No. of online shoppers in India are expected to grow to 220 million in 2025 from 75 million in 2017. Some challenges for online shopping in India are supply chain, high delivery charges, trust issue, lack of touch and feel, inaccessibility of internet, linguistic communication and payment safety.

Online shopping of apparels in India

K. Vaitheeswaran started India's first E-commerce website 'Fabmart.com' in 1999. Vaitheeswaran sold Fabmart.com to Aditya Birla Group and started a new E-commerce website 'Indiaplaza.com'. However, then 'Flipkart' came into existence. It came up with huge discounts and succeeded. 'Indiaplaza.com' came to an end in 2013. After that, many players started selling goods online and we saw E-commerce boom in India.

As far as apparel sector is concerned, Indian consumers were more inclined to shop offline as they wanted to have touch and feel of the product. They always preferred to try the clothes before buying which they thought was necessity. So, the factors that hindered online shopping of apparels in India were trust issue, difference between the actual product and visual, apprehensions regarding size, color, fabric quality, payment safety etc. However, all these perceptions changed due to covid-19 pandemic and consumers started shopping online as it was the safest option.

We saw a boom in digital economy due to covid-19. 67% consumers say that they have changed their shopping habits due to Covid-19 pandemic. Post Covid the commerce will be omnichannel. Online Apparel industry is projected to reach \$ 1 trillion by 2025. Indian online apparel market will also see unprecedented growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

'Shekhar Singh and Sandeep Srivastava' mention in their research paper titled '**Moderating effect of product type on online shopping behavior and purchase intention: An Indian Perspective**' that there are two types of goods, 'Search Goods' and 'Experience Goods'. Online purchase intention is higher for search goods than experience goods. E-commerce players should add personalization and innovativeness for improving the buying experience of experience goods like 'fashion'. New technology like 'virtual walls' and 'virtual mirrors' can be very impressive for online customers.

'Sahana Dinesh and Dr. Y. Muniraju (Jan 2021)', conclude in their research article '**Scalability of E-commerce in the covid-19 Era**' that, the pandemic has caused an increase in the no. of customers shopping online and also the first time users of e-commerce have also raised. A survey by UNCTAD[2020] also found that the pandemic has resulted in a sales growth of E-commerce websites. Bain and Co. Report [2020] indicated that as the customers : pandemic period and could reach 300 to 350 million shoppers by the financial year 2025.

Mobile phones were the biggest contributor to online sales in the year 2019 [IBEF, June 2020]. Also the share of consumer electronics and apparels was highest in E-commerce retail.

'Mr. Jagdish Sheth' cite in his article, '**Impact of Covid-19 on consumer behavior: Will the old habits return or die?**' [Journal of Business Research (2020)] that, as the consumers adapt to the house arrest for a prolonged period of time, they are likely to adopt newer technologies which facilitate work, study, consumption in a more convenient manner. Embracing digital technology is likely to modify existing habits. With time flexibility but location rigidity, consumers have learned to improvise in creative and innovative ways. The work life boundaries have blurred as people work at home, study at home and relax at home. Since the consumer is unable to go to the store, the store has to come to the consumer.

'Ms. Ruchi kholiya, Shefali Massey and Arshia Hussain' write in the paper '**An investigation of Indian consumers' buying behavior during covid-19 towards the purchase of apparel items** [Intl. journal for modern trends in Science and technology, 2022], that, Covid had a significant impact on online purchasing

behavior of consumers. Due to lockdown and social distancing norms, people preferred to shop apparels through online mode.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- **Research Type:** The research is ‘Exploratory’ in nature as it tries to explore impact of Covid-19 on online shopping of apparels in India and whether the trend will continue in future.
- **Sources of data:-** Secondary data is used and also opinions of some exclusively Indian online apparel sellers have been taken into consideration to reach a final conclusion
- **Analysis of data:-** Inferential analysis of existing data.
- **Method of data collection:-** Telephonic interview method is used to collect the actual opinions of online apparel sellers in India.

Challenges in front of online apparel sellers in India

1. **Increased Competition:** Competition has increased as many players started selling online. Competition will be fierce in future.
2. **Experiential product:** Apparels fall into the ‘experiential product’ category. Consumers want to experience before they buy. Sellers should try to give the best experience while selling online using new technology.
3. **Dealing with fake orders:** As digital economy is on the rise, cyber crime is also increasing. Many sellers come across fake orders. There should be some system in place to detect fake orders. Nowadays, most of the sellers are checking consumers’ social media account for reliability. However, this is not possible for every purchase.
4. **Security:** Security is a major concern for online sellers too. Many customers try to leak confidential information.
5. **Customer centric products:** Due to increased competition, sellers should totally focus on customers. Their needs and tastes change continuously, so creating customer centric products will definitely help in sustaining competition.
6. **Timely delivery:** This is also a challenge. The sellers should not make the customer wait for a long time. So, investing in shipping and delivery system will help.
7. **Brand loyalty:** As the consumers have many choices today, they are less loyal. Retaining existing customer is also a big challenge.

Opportunities for online apparel sellers in India

1. **Young Country:-** India is relatively a young country. Youngsters come up with huge demand for fashion and apparels.
2. **Selecting a proper niche:** There are many niches available in Indian market. If you choose a profitable niche; it will create a huge opportunity. E.g. Plus size segment
3. **Tying up with offline retailers:** It will create a win-win situation for both. Online sellers can sell products of offline retailers on a commission basis.
4. **Coming up with new and exclusive designs:** Fashion changes on a regular basis. So, online sellers should keep their designs up-to-date. They can also come up with exclusive designs by which they can charge a premium.
5. **Tapping the untapped market:** Online apparel sellers should also tap the semi-urban and rural market along with urban market.

6. **Making lives easier:** Coming up with easier ways to do things like ‘Ready to wear saree’ OR ‘Wrap in 1 minute saree’.
7. **Combo offers:** Nowadays, consumers like to accessorize according to the clothes. So, apparel sellers can come up with combo offers.
8. **Tying up with local artisans:** It will be again a win-win situation. It will also add differentiation.

Opinions of some online apparel sellers in India

- ▶ There was a 30-40% surge in orders after lockdown during pandemic. The trend continues even today. We focused on manufacturing customer centric products and there was a slight shift in the product range. We came up with lounge wear and regular wear rather than formal wear during pandemic to keep the orders coming. Earlier, people were reluctant to buy online; however, this pandemic has changed the way people shop and the reach has widen.

--Aanchal Bhatia, Owner, Meera's plus size store.

- ▶ We started operations on 5th May 2019. Earlier, we received some orders. However, we saw 50% increase in orders after the lockdown was lifted in India during pandemic. Slowly, we saw a decline of 25% as many players started selling online. This pandemic has brought a sudden surge in online orders and people will continue buying online in future also. In spite of the increased competition, product quality and customer satisfaction are two elements which will bring sales.

-- Mr. Ashish, Manager, YouNari

- ▶ We operate both offline as well as online. There was no sales offline as the store was closed for a long time during lockdown. To cope up with the situation, we started selling PPE kits, masks and cotton masks etc. and kept our business running. Today, everything is coming to normal and people have started buying offline. I think, the online trend will continue but the people who want to check the fabric and fit of the product will continue shopping offline.

-- Mrs. Yogeshwari Bhatlawande, Owner, Suti, F.C. Road, Pune.

- ▶ Covid-19 definitely brought a surge in online orders. The trend will continue in future. Competition has also increased tremendously. Almost everyone is selling online today. In India, the E-commerce situation today was expected 5-7 years later. We are almost 5-7 years ahead due to Covid-19 outbreak.

--Mr. Vikram, Owner, Missprint .

CONCLUSION

The covid-19 pandemic has brought a drastic change in the buying habits of consumers. They have started buying fashion and experiential products like apparels online which they were reluctant to buy online earlier. The trend will continue in future. However, ‘increasing competition’ is a major challenge in front of online apparel sellers. They should come up with innovative strategies and exclusive products to beat the competition. Consumers are at a profit as they will have wider choices and better shopping experiences.

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