An E – Commerce Strategy to Salvage Customer Changing Behavior in the Fashion Industry During Pandemics: A Case of the ICONIC Fashion Stores

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Abstract: The study investigated how the invention of e – commerce shapes customer behavior towards purchasing decisions within the fashion industry before and after the pandemic. The study was guided by two objectives namely, to examine the effect of Business to Business (B2B) platforms and to assess the impact of Business to Customer (B2C) platforms on customer behavior at ICONIC Fashion Stores. Built on a cross-sectional design, the study utilized a sample of 384 participants and collected data using Google forms. Data was processed using SPSS software and analyzed using inferential statistics. Results indicate that ecommerce, together with its dimensions of B2B and B2C are weak and insignificant in predicting customer buying behavior. The researcher concludes that ecommerce through the platforms of B2B and B2C is weak and insignificant in explaining customer buying behavior and probably. Accordingly, ecommerce platforms can't single handedly guarantee sustainable customer behavior unless they are accompanied by other factors such direct marketing, routine advertisement, sales promotion and favorable terms as well as branding among others. The researcher recommends that guarantee sustainable customer behavior, e-commerce platforms should be accompanied by other factors such as direct marketing, routine advertisement, sales promotion and favorable terms as well as branding among others. This is because ecommerce platforms adopted in the current study are weak and insignificant in explaining customer buying behavior and thus supporting such efforts with augmented customer stimulating yet centric in promoting sales would go a long way in informing customer buying behavior.

Keywords: Ecommerce, Customer, Buying behavior, The fashion industry, Stores

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1. Introduction

Within the prevailing marketing environment, customers continue to present enormous challenges to a variety of organizations globally (Shau, Diao, & Wu, 2020). Accordingly, the manufacturers and dealers in garments industry are not spared given the unwithering impact that fashions have on the environment (Karen, 2021). Consequently, investments into fashion by consumers are

premised on quality, class, trend, addiction, style as well as attachment and desire to associate with celebrities for their fashions (Rauturier, 2021). Equally, consumers would also wish to minimize fashion waste to guard against the fact that fashions may often wither yet style is relatively sustainable (Shau, Diao, & Wu, 2020). Therefore, all these competing interests place vast pressures on fashion industry players to plan and salvage challenging yet competitive situations (Karen, 2021).

Similarly, customer behavior remains hard to predict as focus of various segments of customers has continuously shifted from trending fashions to durability, especially during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Karen, 2021). During this period, the interests of consumers concentrated more on survival and hence budgets got to be allocated more on food items with just little spent on clothing amidst curtailed public travel in most of the countries across the globe (Xiang, 2021).

However, the global pandemic of COVID-19 saw an increase in digital adaptation and usage, especially through online shopping (Karen, 2021; Xiang, 2021). Equally, the pandemic resulted into drastic changes in consumer behavior when consumers shifted focus towards acquiring long lasting fashion brands as opposed to short lived trend offs in a short while and equally there was also decline in consumer spending owing to a high degree of uncertainty that surrounded employment(Xiang, 2021). E- Commerce entails the production, marketing, sale as well as delivery of goods or services electronically through to the next users (Turban, King, Lee , Liang, & Turban, 2015). Accordingly, the e – Commerce has undoubtedly had a bigger impact on global trade (Xiang, 2021). The platforms manifest in promoting B2B, B2C as well as C2C and facts indicate that world trade powerhouses such as the USA, the People Republic of China, the Great Britain, Japan earn trillions of dollars through these engagements(Xiang, 2021; Pearson & Shaofend, 2016). B2B implies a practice of selling goods online from one business to another while B2C is an online practice where businesses display their products and services online and allow customers to place orders at their comfort thereby saving both time and travel inconveniences. On the other hand, with C2C, customers are in position to upload products and sell them to other customers with interest in the commodity. Because of the increasing usage of e – ecommerce amidst changing customer behavior within the global pandemics like the COVID 19, it was therefore imperative to design a strategy aimed at countering the ever-changing customer behavior, especially in the fashion industry.

Consumer behavior within the fashions industry is believed to largely be influenced by the needs/desires of the consumer, the perceived social identity as well as the psychological attributes (Xiang, 2021). At present, people

across the globe pay almost equal attention to clothing and fashion issues the same way they do to education, medical care as well as housing (Shahbandeh, 2021).   Thus, satisfying the needs of the customers within the fashion industry might trigger higher participation rates and consequently solve the challenges emanating from changing trends and fashions. Equally, within the fashion industry, Fat fashion is yet another important factor with regard to consumer behavior as majority would wish to associate themselves with brands that are worn by celebrities for purposes of being accepted easily in society. Further still, behavior is also synonymous with social identity as individuals would wish to be recognized by what they wear and as such donning such clothes and choosing fashions as well as styles identifies them with world celebrities to their satisfaction.

Regarding the case, the ICONIC Fashion Store is the leading store in Australia and the New Zealand with a global customer base and a collection of about 493 brands that have a global presence. The store is equally part of the Global Fashion Group which is considered the global market leader as regards online shopping for fashions within the emerging markets. The choice for Iconic fashion stores is premised on the fact that the store has a strong home/local market with promising presence in foreign markets at emerging level, yet it is known for employing online shopping platforms to service its customers. Accordingly, the store is home to a host of global fashion brands and hence understanding its customer buying metrics via e – commerce before and after the COVID 19 pandemic is paramount in guiding development of a strategy that can salvage customer buying behavior and enable the firm remain affluent to all changes in the market. Against this background, the current study was intended to examine the effect of e – Commerce adaptation before and after the COVID -19 pandemic with view of developing an e – commerce strategy of salvaging customer changing behavior in the fashion industry during pandemics.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Consumer behavior within the fashions industry is believed to largely be influenced by the needs/desires of the consumer, the perceived social identity as well as the psychological attributes (Xiang, 2021). At present, people across the globe pay almost equal attention to clothing and fashion issues the same way they do to education, medical care as well as housing (Shahbandeh, 2021).   Thus, satisfying the needs of the customers within the fashion industry might trigger higher participation rates and consequently solve the challenges emanating from changing trends and fashions. Equally, within the fashion industry, Fat fashion is yet another important factor with regard to consumer behavior as majority would wish to

associate themselves with brands that are worn by celebrities for purposes of being accepted easily in society. Further still, behavior is also synonymous with social identity as individuals would wish to be recognized by what they wear and as such donning such clothes and choosing fashions as well as styles identifies them with world celebrities to their satisfaction.

Therefore, with the increasing globalization, the ever-increasing customer sophistication and the advent of technology to among other things support and promote online business activity, it was apparent that understanding customer buying metrics via e – commerce before and after the COVID 19 pandemic would be paramount in guiding development of a strategy that can salvage customer buying behavior and enable the firm to remain affluent to all changes in the market. Against this background, the study was intended to examine the effect of e – Commerce adaptation before and after the COVID 19 pandemic with view of developing an e – commerce strategy of salvaging customer changing behavior in the fashion industry during pandemics.

1.3 Purpose of the Assignment

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the invention of e – commerce shapes customer behavior towards purchasing decisions within the fashion industry before and after the pandemic. To achieve this purpose, this article examined the effect of B2B platforms on customer behavior at ICONIC Fashion Stores as well as the effect of B2C platforms on customer behavior at ICONIC Fashion Stores

2. Literature Review

A study by (Silke & Helbling, 2022) examined how the different patterns of agile and plan – driven project management methods employed by both in and out – suppliers, the reputation of out – suppliers as well as satisfaction with in–suppliers impact intentions to choose a supplier including whether such antecedents are mediated by the any elements of perceived switching costs. The study employed a survey design on a sample of 971 participants within Switzerland and paid focus to the current digital business solutions. The results indicate that intentions for out – supplier choice are maximum if agile methods are employed. On the other hand, for in – supplier choice, plan – driven methods are the best. The findings further intimate that if the out - supplier attains higher reputation, the switching costs reduces and at the same time, higher levels of satisfaction result into increasing switching costs. Linking this to the fashion industry, customer buying behaviors will change negatively with low switching costs and positively with high switching costs to getting a new supplier.

In a related study, (Priyanka, Surajit, & Balaji, 2022) studied the development business relationships domain on publications trend, the influential publications, prolific contributions, themes research as well the future research directions. The study through the Web of Science core collections looked out for outstanding scholars and augmented materials that orient themselves to business relationships. The results indicate a persistent increase in research on business relationships and that B2B marketing continues to be the leading platform for business exchanges online. In view of the fashion industry, the result implies continued usage of this platform to get to the customers and routinely arouse desires to buy and devise means of tuning behavior to stick to a particular brand or brands by offering quality that beats competition.

Further still, (Nils, Rocio, Syensson, & Mornay, 2022) assessed the proposed relationships in a model via a host of settings in which satisfaction mediated between quality constructs in a seller – customer setting across the B2B markets. The study adopted an exploratory design on a sample of 523 participants data from whom were collected through questionnaires and processed using SPSS. The results indicate that trust and commitment increased customers' participation and use of B2B platforms to procure goods and that the key to success is delivering of customer orders to create satisfaction. Linking position to the fashion industry, results imply that for a business to achieve its objectives via the B2B model, the trust and commitment to serving orders placed ought to prevail all the time. These in turn build confidence and faster behavioral change among customers.

A study by (Rosario & Rajmundo, 2021) intended to offer an insight into current literature on ecommerce as well as how such information related with consumer marketing strategies. The study paid attention to 66 journal articles that contained recent information about the subject content from which themes were constructed to guide analysis. The findings indicate that even with increasing competition for business, companies come up with the best e-commerce strategies that help them remain competitive and achieve market success. The results also reveal that firms from various sectors have intensified usage of both e - commerce and social media platforms to reach to customers and consequently design strategies that increase innovation and information sharing that further enhance customer behavior towards making buying decisions. Accordingly, a study by (Huseynov & Yildirim, 2019) studied the psychographic market segmentation analysis and concluded that a total of four segments existed in which customers could be grouped if their shopping behavior is to be managed or at least anticipated. The study went on to

examine the buying behavior of the different segments identified paying homage to a behavior evaluation model. Study results indicate that various seller categories can apply differentiated models to allocate their marketing resources and consequently win market. In a fashions industry perspective, the results imply that it is prudent for firms to clearly mark out the customers they intend to serve so as to design business strategies that fit into their interests as a means of promoting sustainable businesses.

In their study, "Reimagining the Fashion Retail Industry through the Implications of COVID-19 in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries", (Prakash, Narayan , Vihari, & Shazi, 2021) sought to offer a critical look at the business strategies that were deemed ideal for fashion retailers so as to extend integrated online business and service solutions after COVID - 19. The study adopted secondary data from industrial experts regarding business strategies by key fashion retailers in the region to address the effects of the pandemic. The results indicate the relevance of coming up with innovative and tailored strategies to address the increasing customer sophistication in the fashion industry. Moreover, the time has come for fashion firms, especially those that the end users (retailers) to intensify on technological use, adopt to social media usage, as well as adaptive marketing strategies to salvage the increasing changes in customer buying patterns.

Most of the highlighted studies however mainly focus on the factors that influence consumer behavior but do not provide insights into how fashion companies can effectively leverage these factors to improve their online sales. The current study therefore investigated how the invention of e – commerce shaped customer behavior towards purchasing decisions within the fashion industry before and after the pandemic.

3. Methodology

Given the nature of the inquiry, the study utilized a cross sectional study design to obtain primary data on customer behavior. The target population for this study was both prospective and existing e-commerce customers of ICONIC. These included B2B and B2C customers. Probability sampling taking cluster method was the most appropriate. The prospective buyers were grouped into clusters since cluster sampling reduces travel costs for in-person data collection by using geographically concentrated clusters. Moreover, the study used online forms (Google forms to collect data). Therefore, the sample size was determined by the formula:

$$n = \frac{Z_{\alpha}^{2}(p)(q)}{\varepsilon^{2}}$$

…………………………………………….. (3.1)

where n is the number of individuals; p is the estimated proportion; q is 1-p ; Z is the α quintile of the standard normal distribution, with $Z_{\alpha} = 1.96$ when a 95% confidence interval is requested; ε is the relative margin of error expected. Since population is large and unknown yet at the same time don't know the variability in the population that was adopted, we assumed maximum variability and took p = 0.5. This implies that 1 – p = q also equals 0.5.
Therefore:

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^{2}(0.5)(0.5)}{(0.05)^{2}} = 384.16 \approx 384$$

This formula gives a sample size of 384 participants for the entire exercise. The study used both quantitative and qualitative data on a sample of 384 participants and collected data using Google forms. In particular, a set of self-administered questionnaires covering both e – commerce facets on one hand and customer behavior parameters on the other hand were designed using Google forms and used to collect qualitative and quantitative primary data from the selected e– commerce users. Interviews with help of technology especially ZOOM and other virtual meetings with selected principals in the fashion industry were also done to supplement quantitative data from questionnaires. The data collections tools were validated through the computation of Content Validity Indices (CVI) under each variable to determine their appropriateness. Data were processed in the Statistical Package for Social Scientist (SPSS) Version 25 and output using charts and tables, while analysis was done using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The researcher performed descriptive statistics on various attributes presented by the B2C e – commerce platforms as well as the B2B that customers access with intention of gathering the different opinions of customers and augmented users. The opinions were measured on a scale of 1 – 5 from which the mean and standard deviation of each statement were computed and consequently the overall mean computed. During interpretation, any mean results below 2.60 meant disagree while between 2.6 – 3.59

meant neutral. Mean results of at least 3.6 were interpreted to mean agree. Furthermore, standard deviation results of 0.00 – 0.499 meant low variation and higher reliability, 0.5 - 0.999 meant moderate variation and reliability. Relatedly, a standard deviation of at least 1.000 meant higher variation and low reliability (Pimentel, 2019). The resulting descriptive statistics under each variable was presented in table 1 under this section.

Table 1: Showing Descriptive Statistics on B2C Platforms

Statements on B2C Platforms	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
My supplier is innovative and offers variety of choices all the time	197	1	5	4.12	.876
My supplier tailors products to my needs which motivates me to buy	197	1	5	4.16	.900
My supplier gives up to date information about product prices, quantities, size and augmented attributes to guide my choices	197	1	5	3.95	1.049
Security is always guaranteed on all transactions	197	1	5	3.10	1.338
My supplier has a thorough understanding of my shopping needs and strives to satisfy them	197	1	5	3.73	1.034
Average Mean & Standard Deviation				**3.81**	**1.04**

Source: Survey data (2022)

From table 1 above, an average mean of 3.81 and an average standard deviation of 1.04 are indicative of the fact that participants agreed with the statements formulated to assess the enabling attributes of B2C platforms in supporting online trade, especially in buying fashion. This is probably because; the suppliers are innovative and offer variety of choices all the time, they tailor products to customer needs which motivates them to buy, suppliers give up to date information about product prices, quantities, size and augmented attributes to guide customer choices, Security is always guaranteed on all transactions as well as the fact that suppliers have a thorough understanding of customer shopping needs and strives to satisfy them. There is however a higher variation amongst the opinions and views of the participants about the statements indicated by an average standard deviation of 1.04. The findings are consistent with (Wu & Huang, 2022) as well as (Zahra & Zaman, 2022) who provide important insights into the factors that influence online shopping behavior in the fashion industry, highlighting the importance of website quality, trust, social influence, social media, and sustainability. They also provide a comparative analysis between different countries, age groups, and demographic segments, which can help fashion companies tailor their marketing strategies and improve their online sales. The results thus imply that fashion companies need to pay attention to website quality, product variety, and social influence to attract and retain online consumers. Accordingly, companies should also be aware of cultural differences when targeting consumers in different countries.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on attributes of B2B accessed by businesses

Statements on B2B attributes	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
We find professional staff to attend to our expression of interest for offers	49	1	5	3.31	1.402
The suppliers we deal with have remained trusted across board	49	1	5	2.84	1.328
We stick to the online shopping because of higher switching costs	49	1	5	3.29	1.155
Our suppliers offer satisfaction	49	1	5	3.27	.995
Information about new offers and products is available via online	49	1	5	4.37	1.014
We always have confidence that our suppliers will deliver on our expectations	49	1	5	4.18	.972
Our order experience has remained the same even during and after pandemic	49	1	5	2.60	1.469
Our Supplier challenges have remained the same during and after pandemic	49	1	5	3.27	1.511
Average Mean & Standard Deviation				**3.39**	**1.23**

Source: Survey data (2022)

From table 2 above, an average mean of 3.39 and a standard deviation of 1.23 point to the fact that overall; participants were indifferent on the various statements formulated to measure the B2B attributes. This could probably be associated with varying order experience during and after pandemic, supplier challenges changing during and after pandemic, absence of professional staff to attend to customers' expression of interest for offers, declining supplier trust across board, varying yet declining switching costs as well as indifference on whether suppliers offer satisfaction. A standard deviation of 1.23 is however a reflection of higher variation amongst the views of the participants about the statements with regard to the collected data. The findings are in agreement with (Khalid , Raza, & Khan, 2021) as well as (Kim & Lee, 2021) who submitted that social media played a critical role in influencing fashion consumers' online shopping behavior. The scholars further opine submitting that trust, perceived risk, and product quality were important factors that influenced online shopping behavior, while social media use was positively related to purchase intention. The findings thus imply that fashion companies can leverage technology to enhance the customer experience and increase sales on one while at the same time companies can use technology to showcase their products in an innovative and trustworthy way and improve consumers' perceptions of their brand.

4.2 Regression Analysis

Regression is a technique that finds the best line that predicts dependent variable from independent variable. Linear regression quantifies goodness of fit with R^2. The sign (+, -) of the regression coefficient indicates the direction of the effect of independent variable(s) into dependent variable, where the degree of the regression coefficient indicates the effect of the independent variable into dependent variable. Thus, to examine the effect of ecommerce on Customer buying behavior, to examine the effect of B2C as well as that of B2B on Customer buying Behavior, the researcher performed linear regression analysis on both B2C and B2B statements against customer buying behavior which resulted in findings summarized in the various tables under this section.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.314ᵃ	.214	.152	.84755

a. Predictors: (Constant), B2B Platforms, B2C Platforms

Results in table 3 above indicate that on the overall, e-commerce explains 15.2% (Beta = 0.152) of the variation in customer buying behavior while other factors that this study has not considered explain the remaining 84.8% of the variation in customer buying behavior. This therefore implies that ecommerce, through the platforms of B2B and B2C, are weak and insignificant in explaining customer buying behavior and probably ecommerce alone lacks the capacity to help an organization to salvage customer changing behavior, especially during global pandemics. Thus, for sustainable performance of the business organizations, e-commerce needs to be blended with other market communication tools to improve performance. Results are however consistent with (Khalid , Raza, & Khan, 2021; Wu & Huang, 2022; Zahra & Zaman, 2022) all concluding that ecommerce platforms positively influenced customer buying behavior in the fashion industry by providing a convenient and personalized shopping experience. They also found that ecommerce platforms had a positive impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.218	.093		2.334	.002
B2B Platforms	.024	.229	.015	.106	.006
B2C Platforms	.157	.085	.132	1.857	.005

Dependent Variable: Consumer Behavior

Results presented in table in table 4 indicate that B2B platforms explain 1.5% (Beta = 0.015) of the positive variation in customer buying behavior. These results thus points to the fact that B2B platforms are and insignificant in explaining Customer behavior and thus they can't single handedly guarantee and drive sustainable customer behavior unless they are accompanied by other factors such direct marketing, routine advertisement, sales promotion and favorable terms as well as branding among others. Results in table 4 further indicate that B2C platforms explain 13.2% (Beta = 0.132) of the positive variation in customer buying behavior. These results point to the fact that B2C platforms are and insignificant in explain Customer behavior and thus they can't single handedly guarantee and drive sustainable customer behavior unless they are accompanied by other factors such direct marketing, routine advertisement, sales promotion as well as branding among others.

Results are however in line with (Karen, 2021; Kim & Lee, 2021; Priyanka, Surajit, & Balaji, 2022) who submitted that B2B platforms are weak predictors of customer buying behavior and augmented intentions to buy. The results thus imply that ecommerce platforms have a positive impact on customer buying behavior in the fashion industry. Ecommerce platforms provide customers with a wider range of choices, personalized recommendations, and a more convenient shopping experience. Additionally, specific features of ecommerce platforms, such as Augmented Reality technology alongside social media engagement, can improve the trustworthiness and perceived quality of products, and promote customer satisfaction and loyalty.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results, the researcher concludes that ecommerce platforms are weak and insignificant in explaining customer buying behavior and that both B2B as well as B2C are weak and equally insignificant in predicting customer buying behavior. This therefore implies that ecommerce, through the platforms of B2B and B2C, are weak and insignificant in explaining customer buying behavior and probably e-commerce alone lacks the capacity to help an organization to salvage customer changing behavior, especially during global pandemics.

Accordingly, most participants encountered delayed deliveries faced challenges of fraud as well as that of unmatched interests. There is also a big challenge where customers are limited by option and choices to pick from. Accordingly, customers were challenged by the fact that information was presented in one language (English) as well as inability to bargain coupled with additional financial charges. Accordingly, e-commerce platforms can't single handedly guarantee and drive sustainable customer behavior.

Based on the findings, the researcher recommends that since e-commerce platforms can't single handedly guarantee and drive sustainable customer behavior unless accompanied by other factors such direct marketing, routine advertisement, sales promotion and favorable terms as well as branding among others. This is because e-commerce platforms adopted in the current study are weak and insignificant in explaining customer buying behavior and this supporting the e-commerce efforts with augmented customer stimulating yet centric in promoting sales would go a long way in informing customer buying behavior.

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