

Changes in online reviews during COVID era: A Conceptual Model

Dr. Ketan Tongare

Independent Scholar, Former PhD Student Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU), India

Abstract: COVID 19 also known as coronavirus is the pandemic virus has spread to every continent and case numbers continue to rise, according to authorities in 221 countries and territories have reported about 191 million COVID 19 cases globally. In this article, we examine how the pandemic influenced the online reviews on the consumer end as well how businesses might adapt to changes occurred in online reviews during pandemic. The study proposed a conceptual framework that includes key elements more-value-engage. The conceptual model explains a comprehensive portion of changes occurred in online reviews during COVID era. In addition to providing new conceptual grounds for studying online reviews, this article also supplies challenges faced in online environment and with a number of operational critical suggestions to remain competitive in the unpredictable online marketplace and mobilize growth during the pandemic.

Keywords: online reviews, engage, value, Covid-19

1. Introduction

COVID 19 also known as coronavirus is the pandemic virus has spread to every continent and case numbers continue to rise, according to authorities in 221 countries and territories have reported about 191 million Covid 19 cases and 4.1 million deaths globally as of July 20, 2020(CNN, 2021). The largest vaccination campaign in history is also ongoing with more than 3.64 billion vaccine doses have been administered across 179 countries. The latest rate was roughly 33.5 million doses a day as of July 20, 2021(Bloomberg, 2021). COVID 19 has influenced consumers and the consumption pattern around the world. There have been several studies in pandemic period. Kim (2020) suggested that pandemic acted as a catalyst of the structural change in consumption and the digital transformation in the marketplace. Managers might adapt to the digital conversion in the market to improve or even grow further the sales after COVID19. Luo and Xu (2021) studied restaurant reviews and found that during the first half of 2020, customer expressed the least positive sentiments towards restaurant food, service, and experience in April. The frequently mentioned words in reviews by customers were delivery, shutdown, online ordering, hygiene practices and outdoor seating. Cavalcanti (2020) results showed a very negative trend in reviews which was mainly caused by issues related to refunds policies and process, confirming the reported pandemic impact on this sector. Li, Yao and Chen (2021) demonstrated that due to the COVID19 pandemic consumers form a new interpretation that they consider scarce hospitality businesses to be less safe to consume. This new scarcity safety implication in turn lowers consumer purchase intentions. In this article, we examine how the pandemic influenced the online reviews on the consumer end as well how businesses might adapt to changes in online reviews during pandemic. Consumer insights during the pandemic show that the markets might be transitioning more towards online. The changes in online reviews also provides new opportunities for harnessing success.

2. Online review COVID era Conceptual Model

The study proposed a conceptual framework that includes key elements more-value-engage. The conceptual model explains a portion of changes occurred in online reviews during COVID era. In addition to providing new theoretical grounds for studying online reviews the article also touches upon the challenges involved and gives number of suggestions that are critical to remain competitive in the unpredictable electronic marketplace. The conceptual foundation of online review COVID era model (Figure 1) has three key elements: More, Value, Engage.

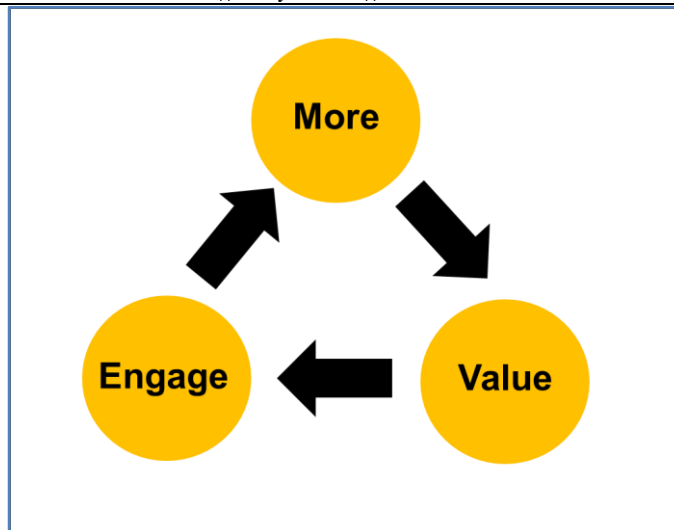


Figure 1: Proposed online review COVID era Model

Source: Author

2.1 More

According to (Powerreviews.com, 2020) online purchase levels are above normal during these times of social distancing. Power reviews analyzed consumer activity across more than 1.5MM online product pages from more than twelve hundred retail and brand sites. Figure 2 shows skyrocketing conversions, with an increase of 101 percent between February 24 2020 and March 21 2020 but no notable increase in product page traffic.

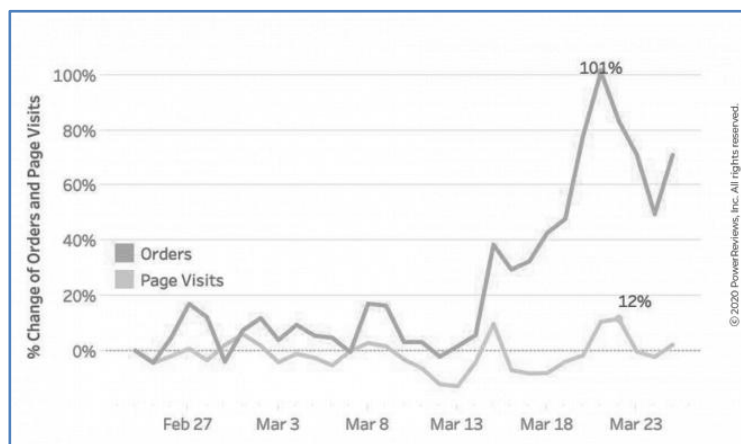


Figure 2: Change in orders and page visits

Source: Powerreviews.com, 2020

The pandemic pushed online sales such that it contributed an additional \$105 billion in US online revenue in 2020 and stimulating ecommerce by two years (DigitalCommerce360.com, 2021). The online retail sales increased 32.4 percent year over year in 2020 and are up 39 percent in Q1 2021.

2.2 Value

A survey conducted suggests that 60 percent of online shoppers in the U.S. suggested that getting a discount while making online purchases was now even more important since COVID19. The global coronavirus pandemic has sped up online shopping adoption but has also led to significant job losses and heightening the need for shoppers to discover the finest deals (Chevalier, 2021). In India consumers prefer discount offers but there is another smaller category of customers who have grown increasingly conscious about the quality of the products, both these customers may have slightly different focused channels. As the COVID19 pandemic forced people to stay at home and shop online. Consumers distanced themselves from just discounts and looked at products that

bring value (Red Seer, 2020). Consumers from Tier two and three cities in India chose online shopping as they wanted a safer experience and they began to trust online retailers for the quality of products. During the fourth quarter of the past year the trend of selecting value over price was seen in Tier II and Tier III cities as well.

Table 1

Tier II and Tier III cities	2019	2020
Volume Growth	32%	46%
Value Growth	26%	43%

Source: Unicommerce and Kearney report

2.3 Engage

Customer engagement is a multidimensional concept which develops over the time and is extensively studied in the literature of marketing. (Santos et. al 2021) results demonstrate that customer engagement depends on informativeness as well as playfulness and brand self connection. Informativeness and playfulness of videos have a significant impact on the value of social media advertisement. In U.S. businesses that don't give reply to any reviews earn 9percent less revenue than average and businesses that sometimes respond to a quarter or more of their reviews earn 35percent more revenue. (Womply.com, 2019). Womply Research conducted a detailed analysis of transactions and online review data for more than 200,000 U.S. small businesses in every state and across dozens of industries that includes restaurants, salons, auto shops, medical and dental offices, retailers. One in five consumers expects to get a response to their review within 24 hours(Brightlocal.com, 2021). Consumer interactions with review content more than doubled during COVID19 period(Powerreviews.com, 2020).

3. Challenges

COVID19 global pandemic probably be one of the major events of 2020, and that it may have effects that may last well into the decade. This period of isolation and uncertainty has a vast sudden changes to their shopping behaviors that is from bulk buying to online shopping, consumers are changing what they are buying, how and when(bigcommerce.com, 2020).

- Consumers have already raised questions on the safety of receiving online orders.
- Consumers may have questions about the packaging and shipping of the products regarding exposure of COVID 19 during the pandemic.
- Consumers may have doubts about availability and timely orders of products purchased in the time of uncertainty of Lockdowns.
- Consumers require more validation before making a decision on a product or service.

4. Conclusion

There are ways in which businesses can influence online reviews to boost their business in the midst of the pandemic.

- Cashbacks/discounts/offers should be mentioned in reviews if received benefits, that could attract other buyers.
- Businesses should give information and make awareness to consumers about how the product follows COVID safety protocols during packaging, shipping, no contact delivery.
- Online reviews should also mention the timely arrival of orders in times of uncertain lockdowns in particular area codes.
- The economic ambiguity surrounding COVID 19 has made many people think twice before spending money. They are more careful about who they choose to buy from. Online reviews could build trust and reliability.
- Having a large volume of decent reviews increases the odds of turning the incoming traffic into paying customers.
- Latest reviews from customers could indicate prospects that your business is in operation and continue to take care of your customers during COVID.
- Use a negative review as an opportunity to turn it into a helpful customer experience.
- Online reviews play a vital role in how customers recognize your brand. They help to build trust and offer social proof.

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