ABSTRACT

Consumer expectation is a crucial factor that leads to consumer satisfaction. In this competitive environment, brands must be aware of consumer expectations. The coronavirus pandemic is a worldwide crisis that has changed the lifestyle, has increased health concerns, and has made economies moribund leading to a change in consumer expectations. This research aims at understanding the consumer expectations from brands amid COVID-19 from a qualitative perspective. The researchers applied grounded theory for the analysis. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews to collect the data. The analysis used open coding of data, development of memos, generation of concepts, categories and subcategories identification, axial coding to identify relationships among the categories, and selective coding to ascertain the core category. The study generates concepts of consumer expectation amid pandemic, which will form the dimensions to evaluate consumer satisfaction. The study provides insights to brands based on which they can work to satisfy consumer expectations.

KEYWORDS

Axial Coding, Categories, Consumer Behavior, Crisis, Open Coding, Selective Coding, Sub-Categories

1. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus is a humanitarian crisis leading to both health crisis and economic pandemic. The virus transmits by close contact with the infected patient. Consequently, people worldwide are socially distancing themselves and observing all the possible preventive measures. The concerned authorities continue to impose various restrictions to avoid further spreading the virus in their respective areas (Ferguson et al., 2020). Even before the government authorities imposed different laws, many households started isolating themselves to avoid the virus (Gupta et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has substantially changed the world, not just because of the disease, but because of the long-lasting effects it might have (Harper et al., 2020). With changing priorities and lifestyles, consumer expectations are changing. Products and services which satisfied them previously might not work in these changing times (Richards & Jones, 2008). Brands should strongly consider evaluation of new expectations and revaluation of their satisfaction metrics. Failing to meet consumer expectations leads to a lack of brand favourability. Consumer perception of a brand in times of crisis broadly defines their trust and loyalty to the brand.
Trading activities are on a halt with closing factories, airlines, shops, restaurants, schools, and colleges to prevent the spread of the virus. The travel industry is facing worse circumstances; 80% of hotel rooms are empty (Asmelash & Cooper, 2020). The airlines have made 90% cuts to their workforce (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). The brand value is down for Delta 9%, American Airlines 7%, and United Airlines 3% (Williams, 2020). With consumers socially distancing and closing down trading, brands face a significant decline in revenue, with many facing cessations. The pandemic is likely to lead to the bankruptcy of some well-known brands with consumers staying home and the economy moribund (Tucker, 2020). During the second quarter of 2020, the global revenue declines for PVH Corp., Adidas, and Reebok were 33%, 34%, and 42% respectively (Hillier, 2021).

There are some brands which recently reported a surge in revenues. People are stuck at home and they continue to use online services to keep in touch with their loved ones. In the second quarter, the revenues of video conferencing service, Zoom saw 355% y-o-y growth, with profits rising to $185.7 million from $5.5 million the year before. Monthly active users for the video-sharing social networking service, Tik Tok, rose by 181 million since December 2019. During the second quarter, Facebook reported a rise from 1.73 billion to 1.79 billion for Daily Active Users. Twitter reported an increase in Monetizable Daily Active users by 34% to 186 million. With people spending more time on social media, brands are naturally shifting to social advertising. The worldwide advertisement spending increased by 26.2% in the second quarter of 2020, compared to the first quarter (Socialbakers, 2020). Global mobile advertisement spending rose 71% y-o-y during the second quarter (Pubmatic India, 2020). Facebook’s ad-revenue grew 10% y-o-y from 16.6 billion in 2019 to $18.3 billion in 2020 (Facebook, 2020).

People continue to shift online to make purchases leading to sky-rocketing of online sales. Amazon surpassed the $200 billion brand value benchmark, with 18% growth presently holding $220.8 billion and 40% y-o-y growth in net sales (Amazon, 2020a). Square Inc. sales jumped 64% because of an increase in online payments (Roof & Wagner, 2020). During the second quarter, Adidas online sales increased by 93%, making online sales responsible for more than one-third of the brand revenue. Digital sales of Nike grew 82% y-o-y. Nike Direct sales observed a growth of 12%, $3.7 billion, bringing the total revenue from June to August to $10.6 billion, which is 1% down (Nike, 2020).

Consumers continue to turn to entertainment for comfort and connection. This includes gaming, over-the-top (OTT) media services, including Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney Plus. Gaming apps installs saw growth by 51.2% y-o-y growth on Google Play in the second quarter of 2020 (Farrell, 2020). In the first half of 2020, Netflix gained 26 million paid net adds versus 12 million the prior year (Netflix, 2020). The streaming service, Disney Plus, launched in November 2019 in the US and March 2020 in the UK, has attracted 60.5 million subscribers (BBC, 2020a).

Consumers have numerous expectations from brands that vary from one sector to another. Hence, companies operating in some sectors find it harder to satisfy consumers due to high expectations. Moreover, sectors may be classified based on the impact of the pandemic (Yockelson & Stanyer, 2020):

1. Negatively affected sectors include tourism, transportation, hospitality.
2. Directly profiting sectors include medicinal facilities and disinfectant manufacturers.
3. Indirectly benefitted sectors include OTT platforms like Netflix, Disney+, delivery services like Amazon, Flipkart, and gaming services.
4. Crucial sectors that need to change their working methods include educational institutes, namely schools and colleges. These institutes must shift online.

The aftermath of the pandemic changed the market forever. All brands are vulnerable and must confront these unprecedented challenges triggered by the pandemic to meet the expectations of customers. Customers will not be satisfied if their expectations are not met.

Consumer satisfaction is the resultant feeling of a consumer after the comparison of the performance of the product (post-purchase) and the expected performance of the product (pre-purchase)
(Oliver, 1980). Hence it is imperative to measure consumer expectations. This research aims to study consumer expectations in the context of COVID-19.

Several studies tried to understand consumer expectations during the pandemic by conducting online surveys. A research gap exists in the literature to understand consumer expectations. This study adopts a qualitative approach using the Grounded Theory method to understand customer expectations during the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews are conducted to understand the emotions and the feelings of consumers.

This study aims to understand the newly developed consumer expectations from brands in light of the pandemic. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What factors do consumers consider while making a purchase?
2. What are the expectations of consumers from brands?

This research uses the qualitative research method and adopts the Grounded Theory approach to develop a theory to understand consumer expectations amid COVID-19. Depth interviews are deployed to interact and collect data from the respondents.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Consumer Expectations

Consumer expectations are pre-trial beliefs about a product that set the reference point based on which a consumer judges the performance of a product (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993). Simply stated, consumer expectations include the factors that the consumer considers while purchasing a product and their views on product and service capability.

Many researchers have attempted to define consumer expectations. On a broader level, consumers seek products or services that meet specific quality standards (Alén & Rodriguez, 2004). As the technology progresses with time, consumers continue to seek ease of use, reliability, security, speed, precision, site aesthetics, and responsiveness, among other things, as parameters of service quality (Zavareh et al., 2012).

Companies try to keep consumer expectations at an optimum level. If the consumer expectations are too high, they are challenging to achieve. Customer dissatisfaction will happen when companies are unable to fulfill consumer expectations. Customer dissatisfaction leads to the failure of a product. However, too low expectations lead to the consumers feeling that the brand is incompetent. Hence, the brand must have an insight into consumer expectations. This insight leads to providing the services as per consumer requirements, increasing consumer trust, engagement, and brand credibility. Brands should be passionate about exceeding consumer expectations and consistently meeting those expectations to keep the consumers satisfied. Consequently, with the development of trust and loyalty due to consumer satisfaction, consumers are far less likely to indulge in other brand offerings or consider switching to another brand.

In the current era of digitization, many consumers are switching to the online purchase of commodities they desire. The brands can reach the consumer at the click of a button while increasing their consumer engagement and sales. Brands are continuously challenging themselves to provide a better experience to the consumer to consolidate the adoption and dissemination of their websites among consumers (Nicoletti, 2016). Consumer expectation defines the experience of both the consumers visiting the website for the first time and those with previous experience (Méndez-Aparicio, Izquierdo-Yusta, & Jiménez-Zarco, 2017).

Consumers develop expectations from products based on the information collected through various means, including advertisements, previous exposure to the service, word-of-mouth, and shared experiences (Zeithaml et al., 1993). The role of shared experience becomes prominent with
the increase of social media (Zhang, Zhu, Xu, & Wan, 2012). Social media affects social habits, causing a change in consumer expectations and purchasing habits (Bicen & Cavus, 2011). Third-party opinion forms expectations and affects brand perception of consumers if they have not experienced the brand themselves (Roy, Eshghi, & Sarkar, 2013). The consumer environment also affects consumer expectations (De Leeuw, Valois, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2015). Consumer expectations are affected by the ability of a brand to keep up with its promises (Lassoued & Hobbs, 2015). Consumers seek a holistic, omnichannel, enriching, and personalized online experience. Hence, brands should try to personalize and ease the non-human (bots) and FAQs (self-service).

According to the research conducted by Gladly (2020) with 1500 respondents, 79% prefer personalized service over personalized marketing. Consumers feel a lack of customized consumer support, and only 36% of the consumers reported to have received a personalized experience. 84% of the respondents are willing to pay more for a better service experience. The research also found that 51% of the consumers switch after having one or two poor experiences. Consumers expect brands to be accountable to them both pre- and post-purchase.

Customer expectations play a vital role in customer satisfaction, experience, and loyalty to a brand (Ofir & Simonson, 2007). Once a customer makes a purchase, the level of expectation forms the basis to evaluate the level of customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). Customer satisfaction then leads to a long-term relationship with the customer (Kumar & Reinartz, 2006). A satisfied customer also promotes the brand and the product by word of mouth (WOM), thus reaching potential customers (Hague & Hague, 2016). Marketers must keep up with customer expectations as failing to do so leads to customer dissatisfaction (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). Unfulfillment of customer expectations results in customer dissatisfaction and complaints (Olsson & Salo, 2012).

### 2.2. Consumer Behaviour in a Crisis

When the pandemic struck, people started to stock up on the essentials and did panic buying. This stockpiling of commodities can lead to shortages and a rise in stock prices, leaving the people in dire need of these essentials out to dry. Media can play an essential role in this aspect by stopping rumours of scarcity. The government can establish purchasing limits.

Consumers become more economical and risk-averse during an economic crisis. With the beginning of the recession, consumers are concerned about their current and future financial conditions (Puelles, Diaz-Bustamante, & Carcelén, 2016). They start exploring products at a lower cost, becoming frugal and thrifty, leading to a decrease in consumption per capita. This change persists even after the recovery of the economy. Consumers become more price-sensitive and explore discounts and shift towards local products (Gázquez-Abad, Martínez-López, & Esteban-Millat, 2017). The increasing value for money drives the consumer mentality to settle in terms of brand and comfort (Egol, Andrew Clyde, & Rangan, 2010). With the economy moribund, lower-income consumers explore discounts on products while the high-income consumers are not concerned (Puelles et al., 2016). The consumers are more strategic towards making any purchase with the resuscitating economy (Hampson & McGoldrick, 2013). They measure quality in terms of health and sustainability. They deeply do research about the products and find genuine reasons to justify the purchase. Consumers with affinity and loyalty to a particular brand tend to wait for reduced prices.

With increased value for money and consumers becoming strategic in their purchases, they are still keen to look for choices. Consumers looking for low-priced products still expect supermarkets to provide them the option between popular brands and local brands. Consumers have lesser chances of buying a product if supermarkets do not provide them with these options. For local brands to be successful, there must be high-quality brands as well (Gázquez-Abad et al., 2017).

During the Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in South Korea, online sales of electronic products increased due to online information availability. Online information plays a significant role in decisions related to utilitarian products (computers, hardware) as compared to hedonic products (designer clothes, music) (Cheema & Papatle, 2010). Meanwhile, there was a
slight decrease in offline sales for groceries because consumers tend to avoid crowded places during the pandemic. Although there was no significant change as groceries are necessary, consumers cannot change abruptly towards a particular service. Such a transformation requires consumers to get accustomed to the service.

According to Global Web Index (2020), three of every ten respondents have switched to low-priced brands, while one of every four respondents uses comparison websites to find the brand with the lowest prices. Consumers are exploring options to save money by choosing free delivery (53%), followed by discounts and coupons (41%), customer reviews (35%), and easy return policy (33%). Surprisingly, 30% of the respondents who preferred next-day delivery are now willing to wait if it costs less. As per the Rakuten (2020) research among 2000 respondents in the UK, 56% of consumers visited the nearby local convenience store for the first time. Fifty-1% of consumers claimed to continue visiting these local convenience stores to support local businesses after lockdown ends. As per research by Adobe (2020), 67% of the consumers regularly shop online in the UK. 54% of the consumers claimed to make an online purchase for the foreseeable future.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the Grounded Theory approach to develop an understanding of consumer expectations during the COVID pandemic. Qualitative research explores the opinion and experiences of participants on a subject. Human behaviour can be examined using qualitative research. It determines the inter-relations among variables for a dependent, independent, and extraneous (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Expectations are subjective and vary from one consumer to another. The researchers want to tap into the minds of the consumers and explore their expectations from brands. Hence, the researchers employ a qualitative research method to understand consumer expectations in light of ‘effects of the COVID-19 pandemic’.

This research uses exploratory research design along with qualitative research. This allows the researchers to develop a cause-effect relationship and understand the relationships between independent and dependent variables (Yin, 1994). Using exploratory research design with qualitative research, the researchers aim to develop insights on the participants’ opinions, perceptions, and feelings.

3.1. Grounded Theory

The researchers Glaser and Strauss published the Grounded Theory in 1967, focusing on developing a theory by following systematic procedures to collect and analyze data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is considered the most suitable approach to research problems where pre-conceptualized theory is not applicable (Glaser, 1995). Grounded Theory legitimates qualitative research (Mey & Mruck, 2011).

The researchers put theoretical ideas aside for the emergence of substantive ideas (Creswell, 1998; Dey, 1999). The Grounded Theory follows the method of coding procedures for comparison purposes. The data collection, analysis, and theory development are continued iteratively until new data does not contribute any longer to substantial development of the theory.

Grounded Theory is an inductive process. The main characteristics of Grounded Theory are:

1. The data collection, analysis, and theory development processes are not consecutive steps but are further intertwined.
2. Sampling for the research is based on the ideas developed during the study.
3. Categories and sub-categories are developed by grouping together of concepts of significance to understand the process.
4. Coding is the process of conceptual abstraction where concepts are assigned to the data. There are three phases of coding, namely, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.
4. DATA COLLECTION

The study uses qualitative research methodology along with depth interviews as the approach. It develops primary data to achieve its objective.

4.1. Depth Interviews

The research uses qualitative research techniques. The two data collection methods which are used include focus groups and interviews. Since different customers have different expectations from brands, focus groups can potentially lead to fear of discussing expectations derived from different income and lifestyle, reducing the validity of the data (Stewart & Williams, 2005). Moreover, organizing focus groups during the pandemic might risk the exposure of participants, making them reluctant to participate. One solution to this is to organize focus groups online. However, the same leads to missing non-verbal cues, primarily the facial expression and body language, due to the presence of multiple participants. Hence, this study follows individual interviews. Moreover, conducting semi-structured interviews promotes comfort among respondents, resulting in a comprehensive discussion of pertinent topics.

4.2. Sampling

A sample is the segment of the population selected for investigation. It is a subset of the population (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018). The researchers set up the following basic guidelines for the selection of respondents to better understand the phenomenon:

1. The researchers chose the respondents from the age group of 18-60 (non-risk group individuals) which includes students and working professionals. These are the best representation of the population as they buy products more frequently. Moreover, non-risk group individuals are more vulnerable to the pandemic and less involved in trading now-a-days.
2. Once the interview process started, the respondents that could provide additional insights into the concepts and categories were selected for further interviews until saturated was achieved.
3. The respondents were asked to suggest other individuals that meet the criteria selected (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). So, the sampling was not random but purposive.

The researchers conducted a total of 13 interviews until they reached a saturation point. Each interview lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The study required responses depending on the personal expectations of consumers from brands. So, any third-party approval is not required.

4.3. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). The trustworthiness of the qualitative research is a worrisome aspect. The idea of emergence and saturation of the concepts through the analysis of interviews is fundamental to Grounded Theory. The researchers used this to ensure the trustworthiness for the study.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

The researchers provided the participants with the purpose of the study to decide if they wish to participate (Bell et al., 2018). The participants of the study are kept anonymous, and identity is kept confidential for all the participants. All the transcripts and recordings are kept entirely confidential. The researchers assured the respondents that the interviews are exclusively for research purposes hence ensuring the safety, privacy, and confidentiality of the information shared.
4.5. Interview Guide

In depth interviews, the core idea remain the same while the questions depend on the nature of responses. Some of the sample questions are given below to give a gist of the core idea:

1. How familiar are you with the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has the pandemic affected you on a general level?
3. How have your purchasing experiences changed once the pandemic hit us?
4. What are the factors which you usually consider when making a purchase? Why?
5. What are the problems you are currently facing now-a-days, which you feel brands should resolve?
6. What are your expectations from the brands amid this pandemic?

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The excerpts from the transcripts of the interviews are given below to understand customer expectations in the COVID-19 pandemic scenario. The researchers did the primary labelling of the data to understand the phenomenon. Primary labelling is done based on the objects which the researchers identified as being noteworthy. Different transcripts from various interviews are shown below. The open coding on data is performed to identify the various concepts generated in the process.

Transcript 1:

“I am not affected financially; I try to save money, considering the uncertainty the future holds. I am paying more attention to how I spend money.”

Here, the respondent talks about the concern for the future. The code which the researchers generated from the above labelling is value for money.

Memos: The researchers coded value for money because the respondent feels that money spending should be done more carefully.

Transcript 2:

“I look for discounts now-a-days. They should organize flash sales regularly. The prices should be genuine. They should not take advantage of customers.”

The respondent talks about other expectations as a consumer. The open codes from the above labelling are discount, flash sales, and genuine prices.

Memos: The researchers identified the above codes because the respondent feels that these should be provided during these times.

Transcript 3:

“The brands should have health and hygiene as their primary concern and follow all necessary protocols. They should have safe packaging to avoid any form of contamination, and make contactless delivery at doorstep. And there should be free delivery or the charges should be minimum. The delivery guy should have proper knowledge of the area. I mean, he should not be entirely dependent on the map, and if I need to give him any direction, he should understand it in one go instead of calling many times. The delivered product should not be tampered or damaged. Also, the delivery should be within the time limit.”

Here, the respondent talks about the services offered by the brands. The researchers generated the codes: health and hygiene consideration, safe packaging, doorstep delivery, contactless delivery, free shipping, minimal charges, knowledge of the employee, interpretation of consumer problems, product damage, and timely delivery.

Memos: The researchers coded health and hygiene because the respondent feels that the brands should be concerned about it. Similarly, doorstep delivery, safe packaging, and contactless delivery...
were coded as the respondent feels that brands should follow these to ensure the health and hygiene of consumers. The researchers coded free shipping and minimal charge as the respondent wants shipping to be free or at a minimal cost. Furthermore, the researchers coded the interpretation of consumer problems and knowledge of the delivery person as the respondent feels that employees must have these qualities. Similarly, the researchers coded product damage and timely delivery as the respondent feels that the service must have these qualities.

Transcript 4:

“The necessary products like groceries should be available. Groceries and other edible items should be fresh and safe. They should not make us wait 4-5 days. The delivery should be well within the time limit.”

Here, the respondent feels that the services that a consumer expects from a brand. The codes are: availability of necessary products, fresh and safe products, and timely delivery.

Memos: The researchers coded the availability of necessary products as the respondent feels that the products should be available. The respondent also feels that the groceries and other edible items should be fresh and safe. Furthermore, the researchers coded timely delivery as the respondent feels that the employees should ensure that the delivery is within the stipulated time.

Transcript 5:

“The quality of the product is most important. Duplication of products is common for online purchasing. For low-priced items, it is a severe issue. I do not want to buy something that is not quality assured. Companies should introduce quality parameters for all products to keep quality in check. Only verified products should be allowed to sell online. Online products should be aesthetically pleasing without losing their core purpose.”

Here the respondent talks about quality as an essential factor which he considers when buying a product. The codes from the above labelling were quality, duplication, verified product sale, and aesthetically pleasing.

Memos: The researchers coded quality parameters and verified product sales as the respondent feels that the brands should introduce quality parameters for the products and only permit the sales of verified products to ensure a better quality of products. The researchers coded duplication as the respondent is concerned about purchasing a duplicate product. Similarly, the researchers coded aesthetically pleasing as the respondent expects the product to be aesthetically pleasing.

Transcript 6:

“Companies should create innovative products instead of selling the same thing over and over. There should be variety in terms of quality, colors, and other features. Also, for online purchase of clothes, they should have a feature to try them virtually, much-like spectacles companies already do.”

The respondent talks about what other factors they expect from brands and other features to enrich their experience. The codes from the above labelling are innovative, variety, and virtually try-on.

Memos: The researchers coded innovative as the respondent expects new innovative products. Similarly, the researchers coded variety because the respondent feels that they should choose among products, so there should be various products available to choose the one that suits the respondent. Furthermore, virtually try-on is coded as the respondent feels that they could have a better pick among the products if they try them virtually.

Transcript 7:

“Since I am buying products online nowadays, I always check for returning policy. Some of the companies have a trial period, and I can try the product, and if I don’t like it, I can return it. All companies should have this. And the money refund for the product should be made faster. In case of any issues with the bank, they should resolve it. The link between the companies and banks must
be strengthened, and instead of blaming each other, they should work together. The customer care executive should be polite and resolving my problems more effectively. They should follow-up on the registered complaints and efficiently resolve them.”

The respondent talks about the services offered by the brands. The codes generated are return policy, in-home trial period, quick refund, strengthening the link between brands and banks, employee behaviour, pragmatic employees, and resolving of registered complaints.

Memos: The researchers identified the above codes as the respondent feels that the brands should provide these services, and the employees should have specific attributes. The respondent expects these features in the products and the services provided.

Transcript 8:
“Doctors hesitate to touch the patients even after being in hospitals. Instead, they can consult the patient over video calls. They can surely follow this for the minor health issues.”

Here, the respondent talks about the expectations from healthcare services. The researcher generated the code virtual consultation.

Memos: The researchers coded virtual consultation as the respondent feels that healthcare brands should use technology in this way.

Transcript 9:
“The websites should be faster and reliable. They should be easy to navigate, and all information must be available in one place. The websites should be fast and secure, now more than ever. With increasing online traffic, security is raising concern. They should provide a secure, fast, and reliable experience.”

Here, the respondent talks about the features of the products and services offered by brands. The researchers generated the codes: faster and reliable experience, easy usage, information availability in one place, and secure.

Memos: The researchers identified the above codes from the transcript as the respondent feels that the services of a brand should consist of these features to ensure an enriching experience.

Transcript 10:
“Ever since the start of the pandemic, there have been many cases of payment fraud. Online payments should be secure. Moreover, social networking websites should stop spam messages. I am continuously receiving links, which claimed to be news or an important document but re-routed me to some unidentified site. Devices are vulnerable to attacks.”

Here, the respondent talks about the security concerns in services offered by the brands. The codes from the above labelling are secure transactions and stopping spam messages.

Memos: The researchers coded secure transactions because the respondent feels that the brands should improve their payment security. Similarly, the researchers coded stop spam messages as the respondent feels that social media brands should provide more effective security that can prevent a security attack on devices.

Transcript 11:
“Also, companies need to protect their employees’ interests. They should pay their employees timely. They should allow us to work from home until this situation is resolved completely. As for the employees, who are risking themselves to the virus, they should get health insurance, higher pay, and overtime pay. The healthcare workers should be treated with respect, provided health insurance, and higher pay as well.”

Here, the respondent talks about the behaviour of employees. The researchers generated the codes work from home, timely salary payment, health insurance, higher pay, overtime pay for employees, and behaviour towards healthcare workers.
Memos: The researchers identified the above codes from the transcript as the respondent feels that the brands should take steps to protect the employee’s interest by providing them with these facilities.

Transcript 12:
“The brands should not mislead the consumer by wrongly advertising their products and state their offers clearly, instead of adding charges to be term and conditions. The advertisements should be showcasing the benefits of the product for any consumer in day to day life, instead of beating around the bush and revolving around actors and all.”

The respondent expresses concern regarding the brands. The codes from the above labelling are honest, direct, relatable, and relevant advertisements.

Memos: The researchers identified the above codes from the transcript as the respondent feels that the advertisement must have the above-mentioned features.

Transcript 13:
“The local store employees must follow all the government guidelines and make sure the customers follow them. They should sanitize the stores regularly and ask customers to form a queue and not create chaos. They must be civilized and treat customers with respect.”

The respondent talks about those characteristics of the ambiance in the stores which they expect from the brands. The codes generated are government guidelines, regular sanitization of stores, the formation of the queue, and behaviour of employees.

Memos: The researchers coded the following government guidelines, regular sanitization of stores, and formation of the queue because the respondent feels that the store must follow these guidelines.

Transcript 14:
“I expect brands to raise awareness among people. For instance, KFC changed their tagline from ‘Finger-Lickin’ Good’ and reminded people not to lick their fingers in their new campaign. Similarly, Uber started a campaign that asked people not to tolerate racism. With such a broad reach, brands need to be socially responsible. Many rumours are going on regarding the spread of coronavirus and the implementation of new rules and regulations. The media brands should focus on straightening out these stories and stopping rumours.”

Here, the respondent talks about the social responsibility of the brands. The researchers generated the codes raise awareness, social responsibility, straightening out stories, and stopping rumours.

Memos: The researchers coded raising awareness and social responsibility because the respondent expects the brands to be socially responsible and raise awareness and inform people on various issues, including providing information on precautions to be taken and steps to avoid getting infected. Similarly, the researchers coded straightening out stories and stopping rumours as the respondent feels that media should play a significant role in this.

Transcript 15:
“Brands must contribute to consumers’ well-being and provide financial support to the nation at these times. They should make contributions at their level, like donating funds and services for welfare or provide services at a lower cost. They should collaborate with NGOs to reach the needful during these times. They should have a social responsibility and give back to society. When collaborating with local business owners, the brands should consider the profits of these small businesses. These corporate giants need to be kept in check to ensure that they do not engulf small business owners.”

Here, the respondent talks about the social responsibilities of the brands. The researchers generated the codes donation, inexpensive products, collaboration with NGO, and engulf small businesses.

Memos: The researchers coded as donation, inexpensive products, collaboration with NGO because the respondent feels that the brands should have a responsibility towards the society at large and they should come forward during these rough times. These are some ways brands can give back
to society. The researchers coded *engulf small business* as the respondent feels that the brands should be complicit and not be involved in such malpractices.

5.1. Open Coding

Coding is used to develop the theory to explain the collected data. Glaser (1978) described open coding as the coding of data in every way possible. Open coding is used to conceptualize and develop categories from the collected data by intensive data analysis. It is knowingly open to make sure that any future directions of the theory are not shut down. Hence, labels are put up and the data is further grouped to the data in more extensive codes to build the theory.

5.2. Axial Coding

Axial coding relates categories to sub-categories. It specifies the properties and dimensions of a category and reassemble the initial coding data to give coherence to emerging analysis. Corbin and Strauss (1990) differentiated theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978) into axial coding and selective coding.

5.3. Selective Coding

Selective coding aims to consolidate the various categories to form a cohesive theory. The central theory is developed as the main theme of the research, relatable to all the categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

6. FINDINGS

6.1. Axial Coding

The researchers developed various categories and sub-categories to establish a theory after interviewing the respondents.

The respondents talk about the critical dimensions of advertisements. In this case, *advertising* is a category. The sub-categories *honest, directness, relatable, and relevant* are all features of an advertisement. These are the sub-categories under the category *advertising* as these features define advertising. Advertising is a service offering that provides consumers with information about a product and must have the features as mentioned earlier. So, there is a relation between the categories, *advertising* and *service offering*.

The respondent also speaks at length about the employees who come in contact with the consumers directly. The sub-categories *behaviour, interpretation, knowledge, and pragmatic* are the qualities of an employee, which are essential for a smooth consumer-brand relation. These sub-categories also directly affect the service offerings as they are the one to which a consumer turns to for any service. Hence, the two categories, *employees* and *service offerings*, link directly to each other.

Consumers play the role of an employee for a brand. The respondent also describes their expectations from their employer brand. With the pandemic bringing in health and economic crisis, the respondent expects health insurance, higher pay, overtime pay, timely salary, and work-from-home provisions from the employer. There are two categories possible, namely, *employer* and *service offerings*. Hence these two categories are linked to one another. A successful brand employer always protects its employees.

The respondent explains the various features required in any product. Here, *product* is the category. The sub-categories *aesthetically pleasing, innovative, quality, value for money, and variety* are the essential factors any consumer considers when making a purchase.

The respondent explains the importance of pricing of the product and services. The product and services should be inexpensive and the prices should be reasonable. Moreover, the brands should organize sales to offer discounts to the consumer. Hence, the service offerings should be inexpensive, reasonable, sales discounts for pricing. The two categories, *pricing* and *service offerings* are linked
to each other. The respondent also mentions that the brands must not take advantage of the consumer in these times.

The respondents mentioned that brands must have responsibilities towards the society. They should come forward during these times of crisis. The sub-categories stop rumours, raise awareness, information, donation, and being complicit come under the categories of responsibility and service offerings. Hence, the two categories, responsibility and service offerings are related to each other.

The respondent elaborates on the services expected from the brands. Here, the category is service. The respondents have numerous expectations for online services. The sub-category online is further categorized into easy usage, fast, in-home testing, quick refunds, virtual try-on, and secure transaction. The respondent explains the necessity of these features to improve their online experiences. These further enhance services from brands. Explaining about the delivery service, the respondent mentions how the delivery should be contactless, at doorstep, of minimal charges, avoid shipping damage, timely delivery, and have safe packaging. The delivery should be contactless, doorstep, safe packaging as health and hygiene is the prime concern of consumers amid coronavirus pandemic. Other features, namely, timely delivery, shipping damage, and minimal charge, are other consumer expectations from the service. Hence, the sub-category is further divided into the categories, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, the respondent also notes that the service should have easy access, return policy, accept criticism, and ensure product availability and robust linkage with banks. Hence, the sub-categories online, delivery, easy access, return policy, take criticism, ensure product availability, robust linkage with banks belong to the category service which the brands should offer. These dimensions directly define the quality of service offering to the consumer.

The ambiance of stores is another category. The respondent explains that regular sanitization of stores is necessary, and the stores should follow government guidelines to ensure public safety. The quality of service offerings varies depending on the ambiance of the store. Hence, the two categories, service offering and ambiance of stores are linked together.

6.2. Selective Coding

Axial coding of the collected data facilitates in the development of categories, sub-categories, and further sub-categories. On exploring various categories, the researchers find that the developed category, Service Offerings is linked to all the other categories. Hence, Service Offerings is the core category for consumer expectations amid the coronavirus pandemic.

To summarise our findings, Figure 1 gives a comprehensive overview of the exploratory framework of service offerings.
As shown in the figure, *Service Offerings* emerges as the core category of the study. The categories, namely *ambiance of stores, advertising, employees, employer, product, responsibility*, and *services* are the various segments of the service offerings. These categories are further divided into sub-categories to understand service expectations. Improvements on these grounds lead to progress in service offerings thereby increasing consumer satisfaction.

7. BRANDS ENACTMENT AMID COVID-19

Brands continue to face numerous issues as a result of the lockdown and social distancing measures. However, brands adapt to these circumstances. Popularism movements, social media, and retention of young talent demand businesses to endeavour for the triple bottom line, i.e., profit, people, and planet (Sheth, 2020). It is observed that brands invested in taking care of their employees, suppliers, community, and consumers financially outperform the shareholder driven brands (Sisodia, Wolfe, & Sheth, 2007). Over a period of fifteen years, the annual return of stakeholder-driven companies...
was 40% over sixteen years, while shareholder-driven companies were found to be 20% in Collins’ Good to Great book (2001). According to the Business Impact research conducted by Econsultancy and Marketing Week, 67% of enterprise businesses have made several changes in consumer policies to preserve contacts and revenues to respond to the pandemic. Moreover, 78% of enterprises have made changes to employee policies (Hillier, 2021).

Meanwhile, governments worldwide are providing economic aid packages for different businesses, thus motivating firms to perpetuate corporate social responsibilities (He & Harris, 2020). It is of great significance that during these tiring times, when many sectors collapsing financially, brands must perform businesses ethically. To ensure that brands and retailers do not exploit the consumers, in UK, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) formed a taskforce to track down the brands profiting by inflating prices (Butler, 2020). It is observed that several brands are coming forward during these crisis times under the umbrella of CSR activities, actively ensuring the betterment of consumers. For instance, the founder of Twitter, Jack Dorsey has contributed $1 billion to the cause (BBC, 2020b). The co-founder of Alibaba foundation, Jack Ma, donated various medications and testing kits (BBC, 2020c). Below are some of the real world instances highlighting how different brands have come forward during these times. The instances are divided as per the categories and the sub-categories developed by the authors to understand the level of relevance of the study:

1. **Delivery:** Online ready-to-eat food delivery brands, including Zomato and Swiggy, switched to the essentials-delivery like food, vegetables, and groceries (Mehta, Saxena, & Purohit, 2020). Several brands have entered the grocery delivery service, including Amazon launching Amazon Fresh and Reliance launching Jio Mart. Amazon launched Amazon Prime Now for the household items and essentials delivery service. Amazon launched the online pharmacy service to provide consumers with necessary medicines, health devices at their homes.

2. **Innovation:** With the closing down of movie theatres and museums, Tik Tok launched several new services including, online movie playback, online exhibitions, online education in the live streaming sector to meet the expectations of interested consumers (199IT, 2020).

3. **Availability of online services:** The clothing brand, Peacebird, was primarily based offline before the pandemic. With the closing of stores, Peacebird moved online, inviting online celebrities, superstars, and corporate CEOs to reach the consumers and hence survived the crisis (Zhou, 2020). Average daily retail sales of the brand exceeded eight million amid the crisis (ChinaSSPP.com, 2020).

4. **Contactless Delivery:** Amazon provides consumers with the option of ‘unattended delivery’.

5. **Pricing:** Amazon claims to be combating price gouging to protect and help consumers ensuring fair prices and ensure that consumers are not exploited.

6. **Employee Protection:** Uber developed a new platform called ‘Work Hub’ to help drivers find an alternative job. Uber also reduced the fares during this pandemic. Accenture created a platform, People+Work Connect, to provide employment when companies are laying off their employees. Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, and Cisco are some brands that continue to pay their hourly workers who support their campus even in their absence.

7. **Information:** Unilever released videos of proper handwashing techniques to educate consumers.

8. **Stop Rumours:** Facebook removed seven million posts on its Facebook and Instagram platforms because of coronavirus misinformation between April and June 2020 (Facebook, 2020).


10. **Overtime pay:** CVS provides their pharmacists, store employees, and managers with bonuses up to $500 (CVS Health, 2020).

11. **Service donations:** Unilever donated 200,000 face masks to healthcare works in New York City.

12. **Free services:** Marriott’s and Hilton’s “Hotels for Hope” program offered healthcare workers with free hotel rooms.
13. **Services at lower cost:** Uber and Ola decreased their fares.
14. Starbucks is providing its partners with mental health benefits.
15. **Work from home:** Google allowed its employees to choose the work from home option to June 30, 2021, for roles that do not require physical presence.
16. Amazon created a $5 million Neighbourhood Small Relief Fund to provide local businesses in need with cash. Amazon donated 8200 laptops to the students of Seattle Public Schools who did not have access to devices at home (Amazon, 2020b).
17. **Donations:** Several brands have made considerable donations to different COVID-19 relief funds. Some significant contributions made by brands are Google worth $800 million, Tik Tok worth $375 million, Cisco Systems worth $225 million, Wells Fargo worth $175 million, Facebook worth $100 million, and Walmart worth $25 million (Love Money, 2020).

### 8. DISCUSSIONS

The main objective of the study is to understand consumer expectations during the coronavirus pandemic. The study adopted the qualitative approach and applied grounded theory for analysis to obtain a fresh view on the COVID-19 pandemic as this pandemic differs from other pandemics in several ways. Researchers used the exploratory approach to understand the relationships between different categories and sub-categories and the entire process. The findings of this study are based on the interpretation and analysis obtained through semi-structured interviews of the respondents.

The literature review section of the study discusses consumer behaviour in a crisis. Findings of this study support the findings of previous studies. Due to the financial uncertainties during the crisis, the consumers become more economical and risk-averse and continue to explore discounts during the crisis. The coronavirus pandemic is a crisis situation. However, the situation is quite different as people are more focused on cleanliness and health. Hence, the consumers are still expecting quality products and do not wish to compromise. Price is still a factor, but secondary to health. Five of the respondents mentioned that they have switched to other brands. Meanwhile, the other eight of the respondents continue to stick to the brands which they trust. Ten of the respondents mentioned that they are spending more wisely as they are concerned about the future. While all the respondents feel the impact of the pandemic, the consequences have manifested themselves differently among the respondents. For example, one of the respondents mentioned a surge in income due to the pandemic. This study finds that COVID-19 pandemic crisis is different from the other crisis, as discussed in previous researches in several ways.

One crucial factor that emerged during the study is the expectations of consumers from brands in terms of responsibilities. Consumers expect brands to be socially responsible and come forward to provide help to the needful by donation of services and raise awareness. They must be complicit enough not to exploit the consumers. Four of the respondents mentioned that they tend to be more inclined towards supporting the local businesses. The consumers are more aware and expect the brands to be responsible pre-purchase, post-purchase as well as socially. They believe that only with the coming together of governments and the brands can the economy get back to normal. An individual plays the role of both the consumer and an employee. They expect the brands to take care of their employees and provide them with health insurance, higher pay, and overtime pay, among others.

The availability of the internet has made our lives resilient. While online services have mostly helped the consumers return to everyday life, there are still many consumer expectations they need to meet. Due to digitization, the world is coming close together, and everything is a click away; the consumers expect better online services. All the respondents mentioned that online services need to be developed further to meet their requirements, including secure transactions, fast and easy usage, and innovative services to virtually try on the product. All the respondents mentioned some services that need to be provided. While the expectations of consumers regarding prices and quality are of
significant importance, the overall takeaway was that the consumers expect brands to provide them with better services.

The study has a number of theoretical and practical implications.

8.1. Theoretical Implications
The theoretical implications of this research include the increased price awareness and demand for quality products and services. The level of concern varies depending on the income. This study supports the literature on the factors mentioned previously. Secondly, the pandemic has primarily shifted the expectations to the importance of health. Thirdly, this study shows the increase in consumer demand and responsibilities of brands towards society and increased online services. Researchers in future may understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic through this study.

8.2. Managerial Implications
The managerial implications of this study include numerous insights for brands. Firstly, it provides the brand insights into what the consumers are demanding during this pandemic. Such insights might increase sales and customer satisfaction. Consumers have increased value for money. However, they are willing to spend more if such spending ensures health and safety. Secondly, this study shows that demand for essential items have increased, and brands can expand into these sectors. Thirdly, brands can improve customer value through online interactions and by showcasing their responsibilities towards the society. Lastly, marketing has changed significantly during the pandemic. Online marketing has increased considerably and now focuses on the health of consumers, quality of products, and efficient services.

9. Conclusions
Consumer expectations are changing constantly. Brands should have complete knowledge of these expectations to achieve consumer satisfaction. Although existing studies aim to recognize these new consumer expectations, they follow existing customer satisfaction models. This study adopts the exploratory approach to understand these changes. None of the previous researchers seem to have done it using the Grounded Theory Method to develop a new theory from scratch from the literature. This study tries to address this research gap. This study aims to help understand the newly developed needs and desires of consumers pertaining to the crisis.

9.1. Limitations of the Study
The study has several limitations. Firstly, the interviews were conducted online. This limited the researchers from developing insights. Secondly, the respondents are all current residents of India. Researchers in future may include respondents from other countries to build more on worldwide expectations. Thirdly, the diverse profiles of respondents can further develop more significant insights on consumer expectations. Researchers may include more respondents to unravel more aspects.

9.2. Avenues of Future Research
Researchers may study the permanent and temporary consumer expectations. Researchers may explore the expectations for high-income and low-income consumers. Researchers may explore consumer expectations in a particular sector and the responses of brands to meet these expectations. Researchers may study how these expectations affect consumer satisfaction with the imposition of lockdowns and disruptions across the chain of brand and consumers. Brands need agile and omnichannel business models and need to increase their online presence. Researchers may develop such models to attain these results. Since the pandemic has led to increase in reverse migration researchers in future may study how brands can use these newly developed consumer distribution.
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Adarsh Gupta is pursuing a graduate degree from the reputed Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (IIT Guwahati), India (Bachelor of Technology in Civil Engineering). His research concerns customer expectations from Brands during the COVID-19 pandemic. He is interested in the field of consumer insights, consumer behavior, consumer satisfaction, consumer value, and marketing intelligence.

Pratap Chandra Mandal is an Assistant Professor (Marketing) at Indian Institute of Management, Shillong, India. He has completed graduate degree from the reputed Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur (IIT Kharagpur), India (Bachelor of Technology in Mechanical Engineering), post-graduate degree from Vinod Gupta School of Management, IIT Kharagpur (Masters in Business Administration), PhD (Marketing) from Vinod Gupta School of Management, IIT Kharagpur. His research concerns customer relationship management, customer satisfaction, services marketing, marketing intelligence, and qualitative methods in management. He is the editor-in-chief of two international journals and is on the editorial board of journals like Journal of Global Marketing. Pratap has won several prestigious scholarships and awards throughout his academic career.


