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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A STUDY ON THE SHIFTING OF BUYING PREFERENCE OF THE CUSTOMER FROM BRICK-AND-MORTAR STORES TO VIRTUAL STORES

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Abstract

The businesses are in a process of transforming their mode of transaction from the physical to the virtual one. The Pandemic has been the key component which has triggered the importance of the virtual forum and highlighted the need of digitization. Businesses' willingness and pace to change their upcoming business models in order to generate long-term value has increased as a result of COVID-19. The necessity, speed, and desire for change have all unavoidably been impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. Many trends have been accelerated by it for the already in existence and obliged organizations to think more deeply about the future. Digitalization is the trend that is increasingly gaining thrust. According to the prediction of Gartner in 2020, there would be at least one style of digital business platform for almost 90% of the existing organisations. As digital business ecosystems expand with the numbers of people, business and things that can dynamically connect, so does the need for organisations to support and enable these ecosystems. A digital platform strategy is necessary to facilitate the efficient and quick execution of ideas in the business strategy for enabling and managing these ecosystems, evolving new business models, and value chains. The platform-powered solutions can be used to uncover essential trends, insight, and innovation for their journey of transformation from brick and mortar to virtual ones. Better customer and employee engagement as well as measurable financial returns are achieved through people and technology working together and by fostering a culture of continuous "change." Thus, the study is based on the understanding the need of the strategic shift of the physical business model to the digital one. Digital solutions are, of course, at the centre of any transformation strategy because technology can assist in addressing a variety of business difficulties and enabling a variety of new business models.

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Introduction:-

Brick and mortar stores face a unique and remarkable challenge. E-commerce and digitally savvy brands need to change their messaging and plan of action, but brick-and-mortar stores need to offer virtual solutions almost overnight.

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The ability to improvise and solve problems has always been essential to running a successful business, especially in the dynamic digital environment. However, the level of customization required now is unparalleled, and many brands are questioning how they can safely continue to serve their customers and communities.

No one knows exactly what the lasting effects of COVID-19 are in terms of consumer habits, but adapting to these changes will only transform businesses, create new opportunities for growth, and expand brand authority during and after COVID-19.

While restaurants have been executing pickup and delivery options for years, COVID-19 has stepped up the need for this service. Fast food restaurants around the world were pressured to close their doors as the drive-thru attracted crowds and the demand for delivery expanded.

Providing online classes by creating helpful content for a specific audience has always been a strong strategy, but the audience has never been more fascinated than it is right now. They are searching for content that is instructional, delightful, and energizing.

For years, movie theatres have struggled to stay relevant as video streaming services have come to influence the entertainment landscape. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the movie industry was revitalizing for its worst year yet. Now that cinemas have been forced to close all of their location, it seems impossible for them to stay open.

But thinking creatively in difficult times can lead to extraordinary results.

Brands whose content does not respond to the current epidemic will be considered disjointed and unnecessary. Your current marketing plan may need to be redrafted or updated to effectively reach, adapt to, or change your audience. If you've already invested in content marketing for lead generation, consider doubling the amount of content you post.

Make sure what you post is authentic, useful, and relevant. In times of crisis, people look for leaders.

Share what you're doing to help your group, how your employees are keeping it safe, and tips from your industry's perspective on how to thrive during this pandemic.

So, moving all the physical stores to e-commerce or virtual stores. Why ecommerce?

Ecommerce is a subgroup of retail that allows shoppers to make purchases online rather than visiting a store in person. The biggest advantage of running a virtual store is that you can market and sell your products at a much lower cost in a physical store. Brick-and-mortar stores require huge overhead to keep up. On the other hand, you can develop your brand online more easily and cheaply.

The digital capabilities of e-commerce software can also make it easier for customers to use various payment modes. Online stores integrate extremely well with many marketing channels, allowing you to target specific audiences, personalize messages, products, and services, and achieve viral word-of-mouth marketing on digital platforms.

Because you don't need someone to 'manage' your online storefront, e-commerce is always open for shoppers to view your listings and buy.

E-commerce was around long before covid, but the economic impact of the global pandemic is forcing brands to re-think their approach.

The concept of "anti-epidemic" brand is often meant to include more digital services so customers can shop from the safety, security, and comfort of their own.

A certain level of social distancing and lockdown measures were taken. With restrictions on physical retail spaces and social distancing requirements, consumers turned to online shopping as a safer alternative. Virtual stores provide a way for retailers to continue serving customers while adhering to health and safety guidelines. There was increased consumer reliance on e-commerce. The pandemic accelerated the shift towards e-commerce as more people became

comfortable with online shopping. Virtual stores became essential for retailers to maintain their business operations and meet the rising demand for online purchases.

There were expanded product offerings for many. Physical retail stores faced limitations due to supply chain disruptions and reduced inventory. Virtual stores allowed retailers to showcase their entire product catalogue, providing customers with a wider selection of products to choose from.

Contactless and convenient shopping became part of changing lives. Virtual stores offer contactless shopping experience, allowing customers to browse and purchase products from the comfort and safety of their homes. The convenience of doorstep delivery and flexible return policies further enhanced the appeal of virtual stores.

Virtual engagement and experiences became more popular among people. To compensate for the lack of in-person interactions, retailers used virtual platforms to engage with customers. They incorporated features like live chat support, virtual consultations, product demonstrations, and virtual events to recreate the personalized experience of shopping in-store.

Digital marketing and promotions got too hyped in the market. With most consumers spending more time online, retailers focused their marketing efforts on digital channels. Virtual stores provided a platform to promote products, offer discounts, and communicate directly with customers through email marketing, social media campaigns, and targeted online advertisements.

Adaptation and innovation have been the trends. Many brick-and-mortar retailers quickly pivoted to virtual stores to survive during the pandemic. They invested in website development, user-friendly interfaces, and improved online customer service to create a seamless virtual shopping experience. Due to the pandemic, there was a change in consumer behavior and habits. The prolonged lockdowns and restrictions changed consumer behavior, leading to the formation of new habits and preferences. Virtual stores became an integral part of the "new normal," and consumers discovered the convenience and advantages of online shopping, influencing their future buying habits.

A boost in virtual stores refers to the increased emphasis on creating online shopping experiences that replicate the features and benefits of physical retail stores. Virtual stores, also known as digital storefronts or online shops, aim to provide customers with a visually appealing and interactive environment where they can browse and purchase products or services.

The rapid growth of e-commerce has fueled demand for virtual stores. With more people shopping online, retailers are recognizing the need to create engaging and immersive digital experiences to capture and retain customers. Technological advancements, such as improved website design, high-quality product visuals, and augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) capabilities, have made it easier to create virtual stores that closely resemble the physical shopping experience. Virtual stores offer the convenience of 24/7 access, allowing customers to shop anytime and from anywhere. This accessibility appeals to busy consumers who prefer the convenience of online shopping and the ability to browse a wide range of products without leaving their homes.

Virtual stores can leverage customer data and analytics to deliver personalized product recommendations, tailored promotions, and customized shopping experiences. By understanding individual preferences, virtual stores can create targeted offers and personalized interactions, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Many retailers are adopting an omnichannel approach, integrating their physical stores with virtual platforms. This integration allows customers to seamlessly transition between online and offline shopping experiences, providing consistency and flexibility in their purchasing journey. Social media platforms have become a significant driver of virtual store engagement. Brands leverage social media channels to showcase their products, collaborate with influencers, and engage with customers, ultimately driving traffic to their virtual stores.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of contactless shopping and digital transactions. Virtual stores allow customers to browse and purchase products without physical contact, reducing health risks and providing a safe shopping experience.

Virtual stores enable retailers to expand their reach beyond geographical boundaries, accessing customers in different regions or countries without the need for physical store locations. This scalability can lead to increased

sales and business growth. As a result of these factors, virtual stores are experiencing a boost as retailers invest in creating engaging online shopping experiences, leveraging technology and data-driven strategies to provide convenience, personalization, and a seamless customer journey.

The strategic shift of brick-and-mortar stores refers to the changes and adaptations that traditional physical retail stores are making in response to the evolving retail landscape and the rise of e-commerce.

Brick-and-mortar retailers are recognizing the importance of offering a seamless shopping experience across multiple channels. This involves integrating their online and offline presence to provide customers with options such as buy online, pick up in-store (BOPIS), offering consistent pricing and promotions across all channels, to entice customers back into physical stores, retailers are focusing on creating unique and memorable experiences. They are investing in interactive displays, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR) technologies to engage shoppers and provide a more immersive and personalized experience.

Brick-and-mortar stores are emphasizing the importance of exceptional customer service to differentiate themselves from online retailers. They are training their staff to provide personalized assistance, product knowledge, and recommendations to create a more personalized and enjoyable shopping experience.

Data analytics is being used by retailers to understand consumer behavior, preferences, and purchasing trends. By analyzing this data, they can make informed decisions about product assortments, store layouts, and marketing strategies, ultimately improving the overall in-store experience. Some brick-and-mortar stores are forming partnerships with e-commerce platforms to expand their reach and tap into the online customer base. This can involve listing their products on online marketplaces or offering exclusive deals and promotions through digital channels. Traditional retailers are rethinking their store formats to adapt to changing consumer demands. This may involve downsizing physical store footprints, opening smaller concept stores or pop-up shops in high-traffic areas, or redesigning store layouts to prioritize convenience and ease of navigation. Retailers are incorporating technology and automation into their stores to streamline operations and enhance the shopping experience. This includes implementing self-checkout systems, mobile payment options, smart shelves, and inventory management systems to improve efficiency and reduce friction points for customers.

Overall, the strategic shift to brick-and-mortar stores involves finding innovative ways to blend the advantages of physical retail with the convenience and flexibility offered by e-commerce while focusing on delivering exceptional customer experiences.

Literature Review:-

Researchers have explored the impact of e-commerce on traditional retail stores, highlighting challenges such as decreased foot traffic and sales and the need to adapt to changing consumer preferences (Verhoef et al., 2015). Studies have emphasized the importance of omnichannel strategies, where brick-and-mortar stores integrate their online and offline operations to provide a seamless customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2015; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014). Scholars have examined the significance of creating positive retail atmospheres in brick-and-mortar stores to enhance customer experiences and increase sales (Turley & Milliman, 2000). The use of sensory elements, such as music, lighting, and store layout, has been studied to understand their impact on customer emotions, behaviors, and overall satisfaction (Baker et al., 1994; Chebat et al., 2005).

Researchers have investigated the influence of store format and layout on consumer behavior, emphasizing the importance of factors like store size, product placement, and aisle design in influencing customer perceptions and purchasing decisions (Bell et al., 1999; Sinha & Banerjee, 2004). Studies have also explored the impact of store layout changes, such as aisle widening or rearrangement, on store performance and customer behavior (Chan et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2014). Scholars have examined the role of customer service in brick-and-mortar stores, emphasizing the importance of knowledgeable and courteous staff in building customer loyalty and satisfaction (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). Personalization strategies, such as personalized recommendations and tailored shopping experiences, have been studied to understand their impact on customer engagement and loyalty (Verhoef et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2018).

Researchers have explored the adoption of technological innovations, such as self-checkout systems, mobile payments, and smart shelves, in brick-and-mortar stores to enhance operational efficiency and improve customer

experiences (Hofacker et al., 2016; Parente et al., 2020). The use of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies in brick-and-mortar stores has also been investigated, highlighting their potential to enhance product visualization, customization, and interactivity (Choi et al., 2021; Yildirim et al., 2020). Studies have examined the impact of store location factors, such as accessibility, competition, and local demographics, on consumer store choice and shopping behaviors (Briesch et al., 2009; Neslin et al., 2006).

The concept of "retail clusters" has been explored, emphasizing the benefits of geographic concentration of retail stores in attracting consumers and increasing sales (Gupta et al., 2007; Storbacka et al., 2012). Researchers have explored various aspects of online consumer behavior in virtual stores, including factors influencing online purchase decisions, trust and security concerns, perceived risk, and the role of online reviews and recommendations (Li et al., 2018; Yoo & Kim, 2019). Studies have investigated the impact of website design, user interface, and interactivity on consumer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty in virtual stores (Novak et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2017). Scholars have examined the importance of creating immersive and engaging virtual store atmospheres through the use of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and interactive features (Fiore et al., 2003; Kim & Forsythe, 2009). The influence of sensory cues, such as visuals, sounds, and haptic feedback, on consumer perceptions and emotions in virtual environments has also been explored (Schifferstein & Spence, 2008; Koo & Ju, 2010).

Researchers have studied the implementation of personalized recommendations, customization options, and tailored experiences in virtual stores to enhance customer satisfaction and engagement (Verhoef et al., 2017; Hsiao et al., 2018). The use of customer data, machine learning, and algorithms to deliver personalized product offerings and marketing messages in virtual environments has been investigated (Min et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019). Studies have examined the role of trust, social presence, and social interaction in virtual stores, including the influence of online reviews, social media integration, and virtual communities on consumer decision-making and purchase behavior (Hajli, 2015; Kim & Lennon, 2013).

The impact of virtual salesperson characteristics, such as expertise, trustworthiness, and likeability, on consumer trust and purchase intentions has also been investigated (Wang et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2021).

Researchers have explored the integration of virtual stores with physical retail channels, emphasizing the importance of seamless cross-channel experiences and omnichannel strategies in enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Luo et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018).

Studies have investigated consumer preferences and behaviors regarding click-and-mortar strategies, such as buying online, picking up in-store (BOPIS), and the impact of offline touchpoints on online purchase decisions (Kim & Benbasat, 2003; Verhoef et al., 2015). Scholars have examined the adoption and impact of emerging technologies, such as VR, AR, artificial intelligence (AI), and chatbots, in virtual stores, highlighting their potential to enhance product visualization, personalization, and customer service (Huang et al., 2020; D'Astous et al., 2021).

The use of virtual reality shopping assistants and avatars, as well as the integration of IoT (Internet of Things) devices, has also been explored to provide immersive and interactive virtual store experiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019; Zeng et al., 2021).

Scope of this Study:-

The scope of this study is to examine the strategic shift from offline stores to online stores and to know the impact of this shift on the customer experience. It will also help us know consumer behavior considering the advent of change.

Objective of the study:-

The objective of this study can vary depending upon the various factors, and we are focusing on the following areas:

1. Investigate the reasons behind the strategic shift from brick-and-mortar stores to virtual stores.
2. Explore how consumer behavior has changed with the advent of virtual stores.

Data Analysis and Interpretation:-

The study includes a mixed approach where quantitative and qualitative data has been considered for analysis and interpretation of the desired objectives. For Quantitative analysis, a questionnaire named "About strategic shift of the brick-and-mortar stores to virtual stores" has been designed and shared among the random people. Sixty

responses were collected via the questionnaire spread which helped in the formulation of the paper. After the collection of certain data, we came across various factors. Along with that a case has been taken into consideration for understanding the practical implication of the shift as a strategic move.

The following are the data interpretation done as per the questionnaire stated:

1. About 63.3% are in the age group of 18–24, 23.3% of the respondents are in the age group of 25–34, and 11.7% are in the age group of 35–44. Lastly, 1.7% are in the age group of 45–55.
2. It has been observed that about 48.3% of the respondents shop multiple times a week, 25% shop 2-3 times a month, 15% shop once a week, and 10% shop once a month and 1.7% shop rarely.
3. About 90% of the respondents chose online marketing (e.g., Amazon, eBay, Myntra, and so on). 61.7% of the respondents chose brick-and-mortar stores, and 43.3% of the respondents chose social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook). 40% of the respondents chose brand websites, while 23.3% chose mobile apps.
4. It has been found that most of the respondents have observed a shift in their buying preferences and started on purchasing from brick-and-mortar stores to virtual stores. About 50% of the respondents agreed, and 43.3% chose yes, to some extent. But still there are few respondents who still prefer to look for goods physically rather than virtual mode, which is around 6.7% and according to them, they had not yet noticed any changes.
5. If they are to purchase from brick-and-mortar stores, then what can be their primary reason to shop? About 83.3% of the respondents chose the ability to physically see and touch products, while 63.3% chose immediate product availability. 53.3% of the respondents chose to enjoy the in-store shopping experience, and lastly, about 38.3% chose personal interaction with sales associates.
6. If they are to purchase from virtual stores, then what can be their primary reason to shop? About 76.7% chose lower prices or better deals; 73.3% chose convenience of shopping from anywhere, anytime; 71.7% chose greater product variety and options; and lastly, 56.7% chose ease of comparing products and prices.
7. The study also focused on the perception of the convenience of shopping at virtual stores compared to brick-and-mortar stores. And it has been found that about 55% chose much more convenient, 31.7% chose somewhat more convenient, 8.3% chose somewhat more convenient, and lastly, 5% chose somewhat less convenient.
8. As per the analysis, it has been found that the respondents encountered certain challenges and difficulties while shopping at brick-and-mortar stores. About 76.7% chose yes; they have faced some challenges or difficulties, and 23.3% chose no.
9. According to the study, the opinion of the respondents about the advantages that they feel about virtual stores over brick-and-mortar stores has been the major game changer of this strategic move. About 70% of respondents chose a larger product selection and the convenience of shopping from anywhere. 65% chose lower prices or better deals, and 58.3% chose personalized product recommendations.
10. It has been observed that the effectiveness of brick-and-mortar stores in competing with virtual stores is high. About 63.3% agree to this, while 36.7% are in a dilemma to understand the competitiveness.
11. Finally, from the study it can be interpreted that the future dominance of virtual stores over the retail industry has seen a growth. About 51.7% chose that it will remain a balanced mix of both, while 35% chose yes, they will dominate, and lastly, 13.3% chose no, they will remain the same as they are.

A Case Analysis has also been taken into consideration for practical and better understanding of the Strategic move. The Case is based on the Company named **Outdoor Voices: Active Wear** and how they embraced the shift to Online Retail from the physical form.

Challenges faced:

In order to foster a sense of community around activewear, Outdoor Voices (OV) opened as a physical store in 2014. In their physical stores, they provided premium technical apparel while prioritizing the customer's experience.

Customer Preference Shift:

Nevertheless, by the end of the decade, consumer purchasing patterns were evolving quickly. Online shopping provided more options, competitive pricing, and convenience. OV was under pressure to adjust to this change or else it would lose market share.

Changing Tactic:

Outdoor Voices accepted the way things were evolving. Alongside their physical stores, they introduced a strong e-commerce platform.

Factors considered for smooth transition:

Omnichannel Experience That Is Seamless: OV connected their physical and virtual stores. Buyers have the option of picking up in-store or ordering online (BOPIS) or vice versa. Across all channels, they provided consistent product information and promotions.

Social Media Engagement:

To increase brand recognition and establish a connection with their target market, OV made use of social media sites like Instagram. They used influencer marketing and aesthetically appealing content to highlight their activewear.

Data-Driven Strategy:

OV customized the online shopping experience by using customer data. This included promotions and tailored product recommendations based on previous purchases and browsing history.

Investing in Technology:

To ensure a seamless online shopping experience, OV made investments in mobile app development and user-friendly website design.

Final Output:

Outdoor Voices' calculated move to internet shopping has paid off. Along with maintaining a devoted clientele, their online sales have increased dramatically.

They represent a model corporation that successfully navigated the shifting retail environment and prospered in the age of online shopping.

Findings

According to the study, virtual stores have several advantages over traditional brick-and-mortar stores. These benefits include increased customer reach, cheaper operational expenses, higher customer convenience, greater product flexibility, and expanded data analytics capabilities.

- The study sheds light on how consumer behavior and preferences have altered in response to the advent of virtual stores. Consumers increasingly desire convenience, customized experiences, and the freedom to purchase whenever and wherever they choose. Virtual stores have the potential to match these expectations and captivate modern shoppers' attention.
- According to the survey, the strategic move from brick-and-mortar to internet storefronts is becoming increasingly important for retailers to survive and grow in today's competitive retail scene. Traditional merchants who do not adapt to shifting consumer demands and embrace digital transformation risk becoming irrelevant and unsustainable.
- The study reveals crucial success criteria for virtual stores such as successful digital marketing tactics, flawless user experience, powerful technology infrastructure, good customer service, and efficient logistics. These elements can be crucial to the success of virtual stores and should be prioritized by merchants pursuing this strategic shift.
- The study highlights the dangers and obstacles connected with the move to virtual retail. Cybersecurity hazards, data privacy concerns, logistical challenges, and the requirement for experienced staff to manage digital operations are examples of these. The conclusion could stress the necessity of resolving these issues through adequate planning, investment, and risk mitigation techniques.
- The study implies that the shift to virtual retailers is a continuous process rather than a one-time event. Retailers must constantly adapt to changing technologies, consumer expectations, and rising market trends. Long-term success in the virtual retail market will require innovation and agility.
- "Omnichannel" strategies, which merge online and offline experiences, are having great success with many retailers.

Conclusion:-

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the significant transition in consumer buying preferences from traditional brick-and-mortar stores to virtual platforms. As technology continues to evolve and consumer behaviors adapt, understanding these shifts is paramount for businesses to thrive in an increasingly digital marketplace.

The transition of consumer buying preferences from brick-and-mortar stores to virtual stores represents a significant paradigm shift in retail. As digital technologies continue to redefine the shopping experience, businesses must adapt to meet evolving consumer demands and leverage the opportunities presented by online platforms to remain competitive in the modern marketplace.

Limitations

- Lack of from a Long-Term Perspective, if a study is conducted over a short time, it may not be able to capture the patterns or long-term repercussions linked to the strategic transition to virtual storefronts. To fully comprehend the influence of the retail industry's dynamic nature, a longer observation period is necessary.
- Self-reported data, such as survey responses, may be used in the study. These data are prone to recall bias and social desirability bias. Participants might not accurately recall or describe their shopping preferences or actions.
- Numerous interconnected issues, including technological, operational, and consumer-related aspects, are part of the strategy change. To clearly appreciate these components' separate effects and how they contribute to the overall shift can be difficult.

Suggestions:-

- Focus on Product Visualization: Invest in tools that let customers visually experience products. Customers can digitally try on items like apparel or makeup or examine how products fit in their physical surroundings using augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). Improved product visualization can aid in overcoming the drawbacks of online purchasing and give users a more engaging and pleasant experience.
- Showcase Product Quality and Authenticity: In virtual stores, respond to customer inquiries about product quality and authenticity. To inspire customer confidence, offer thorough product descriptions, top-notch photos, customer testimonials, and ratings. To reassure customers that the products they buy are real, take steps to counteract counterfeiting or provide transparency in the supply chain.
- Constant Innovation and Adaptation: Maintain a proactive attitude and adjust to changing consumer tastes and technical developments. To identify areas for improvement and maintain an edge over the competition, keep an eye on market trends, experiment with cutting-edge technologies, and often ask customers for feedback.

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