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## Reflections from Marketing Leaders during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*The COVID-19 Pandemic posed radical changes across all areas of business activity, presenting organizations with both challenges and opportunities. Changes in human resources and marketing, in particular, have been particularly dramatic. To gain insights into the subject, twelve expert interviews were conducted with marketing professionals and academics in the early months of the Pandemic. The interviews, which each lasted approximately thirty-five minutes, focused on a number of key topics and were video-recorded and transcribed. The results demonstrated the widespread expectation among the experts that the Pandemic would bring about a seismic shift in business as usual. As well as this, the impact of the Pandemic was found to cause an accelerated digital transformation and associated competitive technological advantages. Looking at the literature today, these predictions and reflections are largely commonplace.*

**Keywords:** Marketing leaders; disruptive change; impact of COVID-19

### Introduction

Disruptive events come with both challenges and opportunities. The COVID-19 Pandemic was such an event with a sudden impact and resulted in need for radical changes in all domains of life as it advanced along the pathways of human mobility around the world (see: El Hajjar and Yacoub, 2022; Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020; Sirkeci and Yüceşahin, 2020). The impact of the pandemic was felt across various sectors, including marketing. At the onset of the pandemic, we recognized the importance of documenting the perspectives and predictions of marketing leaders as the situation unfolded. Although it may now seem like a distant memory, those early days were marked by a devastating period, characterized by daily reports of staggering numbers of infections and deaths, affecting billions of people worldwide. During this time, we witnessed significant efforts, both positive and negative, as markets shifted, consumer behavior changed, and calls for policy and regulatory modifications emerged from the outset. This challenging period was unprecedented, with an overwhelming number of infections and fatalities. In response to the disruption, organizations took decisive actions by introducing new services and products, adjusting pricing strategies, and even undertaking altruistic measures (He and Harris, 2020). To further comprehend the effects of the Pandemic

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on marketing, we interviewed marketing managers and leading marketing academics during the summer of 2020.

Many scholars have focused on the impact of COVID-19 on various domains of businesses. The impact of COVID-19 on marketing practice and consumer behaviour was evident. Many studies and commentaries pointed out changes in human resources and work patterns (see Collings et al., 2021; Akbari et al., 2023). Service industries, particularly tourism and aviation, were struck worst whilst information technology services thrived (Chen et al., 2023). For example, Sirkeci (2020) and Sirkeci and Baghdasaryan (2020), in May 2020, asserted that the Pandemic affected brand loyalty and facilitated switching behaviour (e.g. shortages in supermarkets in the early days of lockdowns). In another study, He and Harris (2020), in the Summer of 2020, predicted that the Pandemic changed consumers' ethical behaviour significantly. They asked a critical question and argued that the pandemic "will have a profound impact on core marketing philosophies, mindsets, and concepts" (He and Harris, 2020:179). Is it still going to be the same marketing concept based on identifying needs and wants and medium to long-term societal welfare considerations? They went on to assert that "In the aftermath of COVID-19, it seems likely that consumers, societies, and organisations will critically re-evaluate and question such philosophies and priorities" (ibid.). Sheth (2022), as the World was getting slowly out of the Pandemic, noted that "both marketers and consumers were willing to shift e-commerce and digital platforms which are both convenient and cost-effective". He focused on the framework, arguing that "context matters" (cf. Sheth and Sisodia, 1999).

Numerous research studies have highlighted key themes that exemplify the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic. These themes include the rapid acceleration of digital transformation, the heightened significance of e-commerce, and the emergence of technology-driven solutions. Additionally, fundamental aspects like human resources, contractual agreements, alternative work patterns, and work-life balance have undergone significant transformations over time. Our interviews with marketing executives have revealed similar findings, such as the emphasis on digital transformation, the utilization of technology as a competitive advantage, and the importance of brand loyalty. These themes have become prominent in the post-pandemic landscape.

The objective of this paper is to expand the boundaries of current knowledge by delving into the valuable insights provided by marketing executives in the face of disruptive transformations, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the paper aims to closely examine the real-time reactions of these executives to the adjustments and challenges associated with such disruptive scenarios. To better comprehend the strategies behind marketing maneuvers, it is crucial to observe the thought processes and deductions of marketing leaders as they navigate unprecedented events.

## **Data and methods**

We recruited respondents from the authors' professional networks for our convenience sample, which was not representative but reflecting the variety of roles and expertise. Between May and July 2020, we conducted 12 interviews with four marketing professors and eight senior marketing managers based in the UK, the EU, and Hong Kong. We shared the interview guide (i.e. questions/topics to discuss) with respondents prior to the interviews, and all respondents consented to disclose their names, job roles, and affiliations. For ethical and



impartiality considerations, we have used codes for the respondents here instead of their real names. Appropriate ethical approvals were also obtained when necessary.

The main themes discussed in the interviews included the Pandemic transforming marketing activities in general, ways to respond to accelerated digital transformation, changing behaviours and lifestyles, impact on brand loyalty, impact on brick-and-mortar businesses, and opportunities arising from the Pandemic.

Interviews were conducted in English and lasted an average of 35 minutes. The video-recorded interviews were then transcribed. Qualitative thematic analysis was carried out without using any software. We have followed axial coding which includes coding and recording through iterative readings of the transcriptions.

### **Emerging Themes**

The experts and marketing leaders we have spoken to have identified several key impacts of the pandemic on marketing and strategies for organisations to adapt to them. These views lined up with those presented in recent studies on the effect of COVID-19 on marketing and businesses overall. Although human resources was a recurrent theme amongst our respondents and the literature, we chose to only focus on marketing in this paper.

The views of both marketing professionals and academics differ slightly, with the former having a more practical, business-centric outlook.

### **Accelerating the Digital Transformation**

It was no surprise to hear from all our respondents that the Pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation. It really became a core focus for virtually all organisations in the early stages of the Pandemic, which was characterised by lockdowns. Lockdowns pushed customers and businesses alike to use online services and not-in-person options.

As one respondent said, “the Pandemic has brought accelerated migration towards more digital consumption. ... Also, it is not just digital - mobile first is a key driver. Everyone is glued to their mobile phones, shopping, and consuming content” (Ref: AJW). Hence there is both pull and push in this drive towards digital transformation. This transformation seemingly comes from a better understanding of customers. Thus, organisations follow their customers. “Leveraging the channels your customers use is key for marketing communication post-pandemic.” (Ref: PMD)

With the Pandemic, “using digital as communication is the core of the new marketing” (Ref: PMD). Nevertheless,

“it cannot only be the only way of looking at it. It will just lead the saturation and ambivalence. I think the companies and brands will look at how digitally they can transform the way they do business and how they can communicate it. But I think, in particular, in the world of experience that it cannot be left to just that digital means, they have to think broader across the more other traditional aspects as well.” (ref: PMD)

The expectations for the future were also in the same direction – i.e. what has gained importance now will remain important in the aftermath. At the same time, more vigorous challenges were emerging:

“Virtual reality will retain its place in the post-pandemic era.” (Ref: AFK)

“This will change marketing forever; I am quite sure about that. ... “Social media management will be key to marketing in the future. How do you handle marketing on these platforms will be key. We will see much more development on this.” Ref: ASH)

“Firms have been able to have more serious discussions about how we can utilise technology more effectively.” (Ref: AJW)

Switching to virtual venues for marketing and doing business differently highlighted technology-related competencies which will last beyond the Pandemic. It offers advantages for both large and small firms:

“I think the Covid-19 has really meant that all the technology competencies have been lifted among companies in general, in more or less every country in the World ... it will also be a big opportunity to really get out to far distant markets because also your partners will have their IT competences lifted. In future, it will be much easier for small born globals to reach out and to communicate with a partner.” (Ref: ASH)

### **Virtual/Digital versus In-Person**

It was clear that despite the lockdowns and social distancing rules and practices were dominant at the times of interviews, there was an emphasis on the importance of the “in-person” as opposed to all goes virtual.

“Reluctance to switching to distance forms from live events due to taste, feeling attached to the experience” (Ref: AFK)

There was also clear understanding that switch to digital formats and online access created a democratisation effect, at least in some industries. As one respondent put it:

“People switched to virtual venues, social media, etc and this is liberating in a sense, making it more accessible. ... Removal of physical venues is barrier breaking.” (Ref: AFK)

However, there is a balancing act needed. There are pros and cons of doing business online and it may differ around the world:

“I think maybe low context people, like myself, we are much more likely to accept this new format of communication, because maybe our DNA indicates that, we do not need all these kind of physical interaction with people. But it is so different from other parts of the world, right? Where people are hugging each other more than we do in Scandinavia. There can be so different situations there.” (Ref: ASH)

The motivations for the switch were varied as one respondent put it:



“We moved from concourse activities in marketing to social media and digital as the former is now perceived as irresponsible – bringing crowds in.” (Ref: PGK)

### **Distinguishing Genuine Empathy**

This brings us to another common theme, that of empathy with customers. It is one of the basics of marketing that organisations need to understand their customers. During the Pandemic we have seen a lot of affectionate marketing communications and yet what was seen as critical by our respondents is genuine empathy.

“if your marketing is not in alignment with the sentiments of the nation and you are encouraging them, for example, to purchase a luxury handbag when people are out there losing their jobs, it poses a challenge - meaning you can't say ‘we are with you’ during COVID-19, because people will assume you are saying this simply to make them buy a handbag they currently have little need for and care less about.” (Ref: AJW)

It comes across in terms of increased scrutiny and amplified the importance of the authenticity of products, brands, and their communication. Honesty and truthfulness are also key to winning business.

“Because the public now has got a burning voice, you have got to be, so careful you step out into the digital space you will just take that all manner of criticism, you need to be careful. Yeah, authenticity is absolutely... Not only authenticity in the product and the brand but also in what you have to say is really important.” (Ref: PMF)

“People crave honesty and truth; I mean that to use the cliché keep it real because that is what that means. Everyone knows this, but how many people actually do it is another question altogether. In that respect, nothing has changed, but maybe it is become even harder to hide behind PR and marketing because everyone has a voice now.” (Ref: PPH)

“One thing that is very important and you have seen lots of different brands and organisations really changed the way that they communicate with costumers. That could be through imagery, semiotics of messages that people communicate or use; it could be with the words, it could be the products and services that they talk about. I think the biggest change really has been a bit more kind of aware of what customers are going through.” (Ref: PMD)

Genuine empathy was mentioned by all respondents. It is not just stating that “we are in this together” but the customers expected, during the Pandemic, that genuine interest and understanding are there but not just the lip service. The question perhaps now is how much of this was just relevant in the heat of the Pandemic and how much of this relevance will need to be maintained in the post-pandemic era.

### **Brand Loyalty and Trust**

We had a hint about what may happen to brand loyalty when we observed people looting supermarkets and corner shops for basic supplies such as toilet papers, pasta, flour and canned food in the early days of the lockdowns. The shelves were empty and a lot of own brands and

unknown brands found an opportunity to sell more widely in this brief window of action in Spring 2020. The impact of the Pandemic on brand loyalty was discussed albeit mostly about the tourism industry (Ju and Jang, 2023; Magna and Cassia, 2022). There were also claims that brand loyalty was eroded as customer satisfaction was dropping during the Pandemic (Mason et al., 2020). At that brief moment of lockdowns, it felt more like “Loyalty is done. Less big tickets items, fewer premium items as well” because of great uncertainty at the time (Ref: PMF).

It was argued that big brands are likely to come out as winners because of the amplified importance of trust. However, that trust can be maintained only if you can protect the brand from the threat of “Fake news” as one respondent put it: “it is one minefield, companies need to control their narratives and that is a big challenge now.” (Ref: AJW)

“I think overall, in crisis times, consumers tend to stick to the brands that they used to have. I think maybe the brand loyalty will even increase during these times, so people are going for the safe brands that they know of and they are a bit reluctant to take up new brands and trends.” (Ref: ASH)

To sustain brands in the Pandemic, it is about not trying to be something you are not and the expectation is that big brands maintain their loyalty base.

“There is loyalty to the big brands like Ali, Tencent, and there is that trust. I think, now more than ever, loyalty equals to trust in this space. It is really sort of building on that trust and being super transparent to our consumers.” (Ref: PGK)

The trust and loyalty is linked to what organisations are communicating and how they are doing it.

“People crave honesty and truth; I mean that to use the cliché keep it real because that is what that means. Everyone knows this, but how many people actually do it is another question altogether. In that respect, nothing has changed, but maybe it is become even harder to hide behind PR and marketing because everyone has a voice now.” (Ref: PPH)

## **Conclusion**

Our study was conducted with marketing leaders and leading marketing scholars in the early stages of COVID-19 pandemic to capture the transformation of marketing functions and consumer behaviour as a result of the Pandemic. The Pandemic has shown us that resilience is a critical skill that is needed in today's management practice. It has also shown us that tools that support the development of critical thinking skills are important and in demand. Skills like identifying market segments and matching them to customer needs and demand can be supported digitally. A key area of debate that has surfaced is the need for innovative and entrepreneurial skills to be developed in order for leaders to be able to identify these skills and use them in the challenges that are being faced. The issue of leadership according to those interviewed was the need to be authentic leaders and ones that can be trusted. The lockdown had interesting side effects like bringing forward people who normally stay in the backroom and get on with things. The Pandemic has made them surface and engage more with the teams that they were involved with. The rapid adoption and adaptation rates has further shown the agility of individuals to focus their attention and energies in supporting the business.



Two years on and now we are in a better position to reflect on what happened and how marketers and organisations reacted to the Pandemic. In early 2020, amid horrifying death tolls and infection numbers of millions, it was almost certain nothing would remain the same after the Pandemic. However now, we all need to rethink and reflect on our reactions at the time too. Is marketing facing a new paradigm? Are social and ethical marketing approaches getting more incorporated into driving marketing philosophies? Or are we more or less back to business as usual? Future research needs to address these questions.

### Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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