CUSTOMERS' RESPONSE TOWARDS ONLINE BUSINESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY ON SELECTED ONLINE BUSINESSES IN AN EMERGING COUNTRY

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ⓘD *Farin Sohana* [(a)1]

[(a)] *Lecturer, Department of Business Studies, State University of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh; E-mail: farinsohana13@gmail.com*

A B S T R A C T

Nowadays, online business plays a significant role in the digital era. People all over the world are highly engaged in online business. Moreover, consumers are shifting their buying behavior towards online business rather than spot purchases. The popularity and significance of online business have increased dramatically in the period of COVID-19. Many people have started their businesses rather than finding new jobs and other opportunities. However, online business owners may not receive similar responses from their customers. This study investigates customers' reactions toward online businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on selected online businesses in an emerging country. The purpose is to evaluate how online business owners adapted to changes in customer behavior. The primary objectives include analyzing customer responses during the pandemic, identifying the social media platforms used for online businesses, comparing customer interactions before and during the pandemic, and providing actionable recommendations for new online businesses to attract and retain customers. A quantitative and exploratory research design was employed, with data collected through surveys involving 40 online business owners. Statistical tools such as descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and graphical representations were used for data analysis. The findings reveal that customer responses to online businesses were generally positive during the pandemic, with increased sales for many business owners. Specific strategies, including modest price reductions, played a role in this success. The study concludes that online businesses experienced growth during the pandemic, driven by adaptive strategies and evolving consumer preferences.

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 period, there was a massive loss in every sector of online businesses. Only the wise and the strategic can survive at this moment. Without proper strategies and tricks, no business can survive this pandemic. The study is based on this entire concept. It will analyze all the current responses the online page owners are getting from consumers. How will they use the response, and what has changed during COVID-19? The way these page owners are coping with this situation. It will help to understand the online marketplace and the changes they are currently going through. Nowadays, many choose to be entrepreneurs rather than job seekers or losers.

Online business can be the best platform for all entrepreneurs, especially those with little to no investment or minor to take risks with. Nowadays, there are various types of online pages, such as cosmetics, dresses, accessories, foods, and different kinds of services that can be availed of through the Internet. And a wide range of female entrepreneurs are running their e-business successfully. Though all the business was running smoothly, suddenly, the global pandemic COVID-19 is playing a massive role in every kind of business. Various new trends have started to keep pace with this pandemic. Multiple people have lost their jobs, their earnings, their houses, and all that. So, people began trying to develop and establish their businesses. Suddenly, lots of new pages started on their journeys. But in the end, what matters the most is how many customers one is getting, how customers interact with these new business ventures, and how these businesses are running and making a profit.

This study mainly focuses on these *factors*. This study will bring out all this information related to new and old business organizations or pages operated by the Internet. The main objective of this study is to analyze the responses online page owners are getting from customers to online businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also investigated the factors affecting customers' online buying behavior using various social media platforms running online businesses.

The following section reviews a few pieces of literature related to the topic. The methodology part is designed to survey the customers regarding online business. A quantitative study was conducted, and SPSS was used as the research tool. Finally, the result is interpreted in the next section. In the conclusion, the whole summary is given. This research will be helpful for various online business owners to improve their business, and further study can be conducted to compare the customers' response towards online business during the COVID-19 and post-COVID period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous pieces of writing were reviewed to perform the study, so the evaluation of pertinent pieces of writing has been essentially contested. Consumer behavior was significantly altered by the COVID-19 epidemic, especially in how they interacted with internet retailers. Many reasons, such as limitations on physical movement, shifts in consumer interests, and the Introduction of new technologies, contributed to this transformation. Numerous in-depth studies have examined these modifications, offering insights into how consumers reacted to internet retailers throughout the epidemic.

Two significant aspects often influence customers' views toward online shopping: perceived advantages and trust (Hoque et al., 2015). Consequently, it appears that customer behavior about online buying is highly influenced by perceived benefits and trust (Al-Debei et al., 2015). According to Gong, Stump, and Maddox (2013), in China, customers' intentions to purchase online are influenced by several characteristics, including age, income, education, and marital status. However, the most significant element is their perceived utility.

Numerous elements influence the act of Internet purchasing. Additionally, there are several attempts to divide them into specific categories. Cheah et al. (2015) attempted to categorize them into three categories: vendor and product characteristics (which include special offers and discounts on a variety of products), consumer characteristics (which include personal, social, and psychological attributes and online purchasing experiences), and channel characteristics or features (which include quality of services, associated risks, and trust characteristics of online shopping). Additionally, Abebe (2014) categorized these elements into the following groupings according to each attribute: Experience (which includes professional advice, accessibility, and discounts when first published), Perceived Risk (which provides for privacy, system security, fraudulent behavior, credit card security, and product-related issues), and Shopping Motivations (which include price, service quality, advertisement, and marketing), Experience, which provides for professional advice, website design, availability, accessibility, and payment methods; Service Quality, which entails providing good product introductions, offering additional product choices; dependability; pre- and after-sale support; and gathering customer feedback; and Trust, which entails providing a marketable product, professional skills, accurate Introduction; payment security; and website security and authenticity.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, entrepreneurship has taken many forms, with many individuals launching their own companies. They use a variety of social media platforms to advertise their business. Additionally, they use the Internet to accept orders. For this reason, COVID-19 is crucial to all company types. Online shopping has, therefore, become more popular, and many people have also launched their websites or businesses. Thus, adopting social media to become an entrepreneur is becoming increasingly common those days. Within a month of the global epidemic, COVID-19 altered global purchasing habits (Shahzad, Chin, Altaf, & Bajwa, 2020). The effects of the coronavirus are uncontrollable and unstoppable worldwide (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020). Owing to the shutdown of the university, the lockdown, the isolation, and the liquidation of physical stores, the rapid rise in internet usage has become essential for all enterprises. It has drastically altered the way business is done. Companies must concentrate on the rapidly expanding information technology trends in a competitive environment to remain viable and reduce costs (Abebe, 2014).

The COVID-19 epidemic has caused a spike in online sales and a change in customer behavior, which has substantially affected the e-commerce sector. Physical establishments were forced to close, forcing consumers to adjust to the new circumstances and begin making purchases online. E-commerce companies have significantly benefited from this change in customer behavior as it has allowed them to take advantage of the rising demand for online shopping (Gao, Yu, Wang, 2022). Physical establishments were forced to close, forcing consumers to adjust to the new circumstances and begin making purchases online. E-commerce companies have significantly benefited from this change in customer behavior as it has allowed them to take advantage of the rising demand for online shopping (Gao, Yu, Wang, 2022). Gu et al. (2021) report that during COVID-19, consumers' online purchasing behavior significantly altered. Also, the customer learned about internet shopping. Their better Experience significantly impacted their purchasing habit. Research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the uptake of e-commerce platforms, resulting in a notable surge in customer inclination towards digital transactions (Maheswari, 2023). The World Economic Forum (2021) claims that lockdown procedures and social alienation caused an unparalleled rise in online consumer behavior, resulting in a spike in e-commerce sales for several companies. Customers swiftly adjusted to purchasing both necessary and non-necessary items online. This was corroborated by UNCTAD (2021) research, which also noted a significant rise in e-commerce in poor nations. This was particularly noticeable in product categories, including food, home goods, and medical supplies. The booming of e-commerce has been particularly evident in necessities like food and medications, where online sales have increased by 15–30% (McKinsey, 2021). As the purpose of this study is to investigate customers' responses towards online businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to all this literature, two hypotheses are proposed:

H_0: *There is no significant impact of COVID-19 on customers' responses towards online business.*
H_1: *There is a significant impacts of COVID-19 on customers' responses towards online business.*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Due to the nature of this study, quantitative research has been conducted to find out the responses online business page owners are getting towards their business from their customers during COVID-19. From the objective perspective, it

combines exploratory and correlational studies. Research done to address an issue that is not well-defined is known as exploratory research. It often relies on secondary research like reviewing available literature or data, qualitative approaches like informal discussions with consumers, page owners, employees, management, or competitors, and more formal approaches through in-depth interviews and surveys. A correlational study is a study whose main aim is finding or proving a link or dependency between two or more characteristics.

Survey research has been done to collect data. Moreover, the data are analyzed using the statistical tool Mean, Std. Deviation. In this study, there are twelve independent variables which are the outcome of twelve different questions presented in the questionnaire which are Customer Queries (CQ), Page Reach (PR), Page Engagement (PE), Page Boosting (PB), Returning Customers (RC), No Reduction in Selling Price (NSP), Reduced Number of Returning Products (RRP), No New Strategies for COVID-19 (NNS), Less Number of Fraud Customers (NFC), Enough Earning (EE), No Trouble (NT), Effective Facebook Policy (EFP) and the dependent variable is Customers' Responses (CR).

This study's population consisted of all online business organizations or pages. The population of this study is all the page owners doing online business on Facebook, and there are over 60 million. Taro Yamane (1967) provided a simplified formula and table to calculate sample size. As per the formula, that is-

$$n=N/1+ N(e)^2$$

Where N=Population
n= Sample size
e=Margin of error (5%)

Thus, the sample size (n) will be 10,000/ $\{1+10, 000. (0.05)^2\}$
=10000/26
=384.61 or 385

However, as the sample result is too high, it's quite impossible to contact all of them in this short period. So, the sample size will be kept small with 40-page owners. This sample size can provide a satisfactory and reliable result.

Here, the Purposive Sampling Method is used to conduct the research. A purposive sample is a non-probability sample chosen by the study's goal and population characteristics. (Crossman, 2020). So, the samples were selected based on the study's characteristics and objectives. The data were collected from the samples who participated in the survey. The questionnaire was sent based on the purposive sampling method. Based on some unique criteria, the population was found out. From those populations, 40 respondents participated in the survey as samples. The analysis of collected data has been completed with the help of statistical tools. Microsoft Excel and SPSS have been used mainly for statistical calculations like mean, median, and standard deviation. The answers to the survey about customer responses page owners are getting towards online business during COVID-19 were first inserted in an SPSS worksheet, arranging the respondents in columns and statements in rows. The mean was calculated from the Likert scale calculation, and an overall perception or relation between dependent and independent variables was prepared by measuring the correlation. Descriptive analysis and frequency distribution were done using MS Excel and SPSS software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Statements	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Customer queries have increased during COVID-19 (CQ)	40	2.00	5.00	3.90	.928
All contents from the page are getting reached to desired customers during COVID-19 (PR)	40	2.00	5.00	3.25	.981
All contents on the page are getting enough engagement from the audience during COVID-19 (PE)	40	2.00	5.00	3.20	.823
Page boosting has been effective during COVID-19 (PB)	40	2.00	5.00	3.05	.815
The number of returning customers is still the same (RC)	40	2.00	5.00	3.40	.778
The selling price of the products has not been reduced during COVID-19 ((NRSP)	40	2.00	5.00	3.30	1.09
No extra strategies were built up to run the online business during COVID-19 (NNS)	40	2.00	4.00	2.95	.714
The number of fraud customers has not been increased during COVID-19 (NFC)	40	1.00	5.00	2.63	.952
The earnings from this business during COVID-19 is enough to bear all the costs (EE)	40	1.00	5.00	2.88	1.09
The number of returning products has not been increased during COVID-19 (RRP)	40	1.00	5.00	2.83	1.01
Facebook's changed policy for doing online business has been effective during COVID-19 (EFP)	40	1.00	5.00	3.25	1.01
I have not faced any trouble in operating my business during COVID-19 (NT)	40	1.00	4.00	2.60	.955

This table summarizes responses to a survey about business performance during COVID-19 across several aspects, measured on a scale from 1 to 5. Here's a breakdown:

Columns:
- **Statements**: Each row describes a statement related to business experiences during COVID-19.
- **N**: The number of respondents (constant at 40 for all statements).
- **Minimum and Maximum**: The lowest and highest ratings given for each statement.
- **Mean**: The average score for each statement.
- **Std. Deviation**: The variability of responses; higher values indicate more varied responses.

Key Observations:
- **High Mean (3.90)**: "Customer queries have increased during COVID-19 (CQ)" received the highest average score, indicating agreement.
- **Moderate Mean (around 3.20–3.40)**: Statements like "Returning customers remained consistent (RC)" and "Contents reached the desired audience (PR)" show moderate agreement.
- **Low Mean (around 2.60–2.88)**: Statements like "No trouble in operations (NT)" and "Earnings are enough (EE)" suggest lower agreement.
- **High Standard Deviation (around 1.09)**: Indicates varying opinions, such as "Earnings are enough (EE)."

This analysis provides insights into challenges and performance variations businesses faced during COVID-19. Let me know if you'd like more details or interpretation. A few of the survey questions were used in the study to get a better idea about the participants of the research.

Years of Running Online Business
The following column chart shows how long respondents (page owners) have been doing online business. The chart perfectly indicates that from the total 40 respondents, 26 persons were doing business for less than 1 year, and 65% of the sample were newcomers in the online business field. Then, 25% ran their business for 1-3 years, and finally, 10% of the business owners, with only four people, operated the business for more than 3 years. So, it can be said that many newcomers in the online business platform have emerged as entrepreneurs.
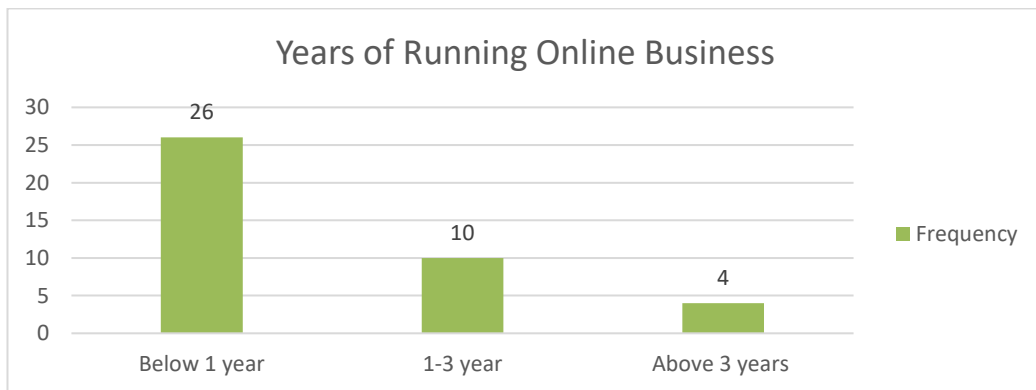

Figure 1. Duration of Doing Online Business

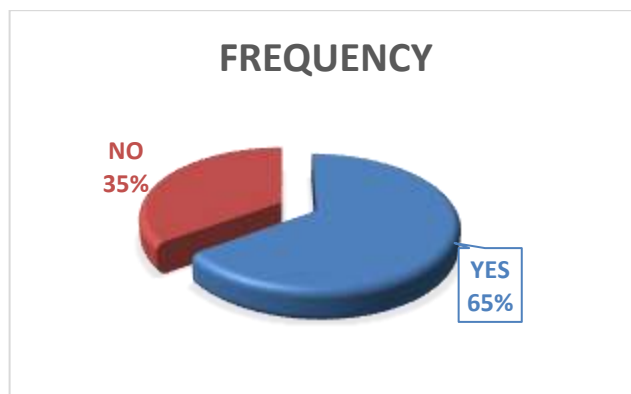**Portion of increase in Sell during COVID-19**

Figure 2. Portion of increase in Sell during COVID-19

According to 65% of page owners, their sales have increased during COVID-19, which is 26 of 40 respondents. The remaining 35% said NO to this question because their sales have not increased during COVID-19. So, 65% of the samples means that most people are getting better customer responses regarding their online business during COVID-19.

As their sales have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, they are getting better responses towards their business, and client queries have increased. This clarifies the main objective of this paper. Further analysis has been summarized through a questionnaire.

Effect of COVID-19 on running online business
According to 70%-page owners, COVID-19 significantly impacts their business, representing 28 persons out of 40 respondents. The remaining 30% said NO to this question because the impact of COVID-19 was not that high. So, many page owners felt the change in their business because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper aims to analyze the responses page owners are getting from customers to their online business during COVID-19. To know this COVID-19 pandemic's effect on online business should be known. According to this impact, their sales, page reach, and page engagement have changed, which is analyzed through other survey questions to bring out customers' responses towards their business.

As displayed in Table 2, all functional behaviors are intercorrelated except POSP, ESP, and UIFNP, as indicated in the table below. Most of the correlations are statistically significant at p<0.01.

Table 2. Correlations

	CQ	PR	PE	PB	RC	NRSP	RRP	NNS	NFC	EE	EFP	NT
CQ	1	.338*	.363*	.075	.057	.056	.031	.044	.118	.418**	.220	.040
PR	.338*	1	.604**	.209	.168	.120	.055	-.227	-.084	.438**	.533**	.109
PE	.363*	.604**	1	.291	.112	.389*	-.113	.098	-.049	.257	.403*	.137
PB	.075	.209	.291	1	-.073	-.017	-.084	.322*	-.114	.411**	.078	-.171
RC	.057	.168	.112	-.073	1	.248	.083	-.069	.026	.212	.033	.014
NRSP	.056	.120	.389*	-.017	.248	1	.086	.185	.398*	.032	.350*	.364*
RRP	.031	.055	-.113	-.084	.083	.086	1	.160	.521**	.058	-.018	.308
NNS	.044	-.227	.098	.322*	-.069	.185	.160	1	.250	.225	-.007	.310
NFC	.118	-.084	-.049	-.114	.026	.398*	.521**	.250	1	.189	.221	.351*
EE	.418**	.438**	.257	.411**	.212	.032	.058	.225	.189	1	.286	.271
EFP	.220	.533**	.403*	.078	.033	.350*	-.018	-.007	.221	.286	1	.240
NT	.040	.109	.137	-.171	.014	.364*	.308	.310	.351*	.271	.240	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

All correlations are positive, and some produced strong uphill linear relationships. All contents on the page are getting enough engagement from the audience during COVID-19 (PE) has a strong relation with All contents from the page is getting reached to desired customers during COVID-19 (PR) (r=.604), moderate correlation with Facebook's changed policy for doing online business has been compelling during COVID-19 (EFP) (r=0.403), The earning from this business during COVID-19 is enough to bear all the costs (EE) (r=.438). The number of fraud customers who have not increased during COVID-19 (NFC) has a strong correlation with the number of returning products that have not increased during COVID-19 (RRP) (r=.521).

All contents from the page reached desired customers during COVID-19 (PR), which has a strong relationship with All contents on the page getting enough engagement from the audience during COVID-19 (PE) (r=.604). The earnings from this business during COVID-19 are enough to bear all the costs (EE) (r=.438); Facebook's changed policy for doing online business has been effective during COVID-19 (EFP) (r=.533).

The earnings from this business during COVID-19 are enough to bear all the costs (EE) and have a moderate and significant correlation with Customer queries that have increased during COVID-19 (CQ) (r=.418). All contents from the page reached desired customers during COVID-19 (PR) (r=.438). Page boosting has been effective during COVID-19 (PB) (r=.411)

The selling price of the products has not reduced during COVID-19 ((NRSP) is positively correlated with All contents on the page getting enough engagement from the audience during COVID-19 (PE) (r=.389), number of fraud customers has not increased during COVID-19 (NFC) (r=.398), researcher has not faced any trouble to operate my business during COVID-19 (NT) (r=.364). Other correlations have been found varying from weak to moderate levels. Some correlations also show negative relationships, but they are very few.

Descriptive statistics are also calculated, which is given below:

Here, the survey findings are represented by different parameters. The answers to the questions have been presented according to the parameters that help understand the responses online business owners get from their customers during COVID-19. Survey findings have been analyzed descriptively to interpret the respondents' answers and transform them into a form that will make them easy to understand.

Frequency distribution and percentile measures have been undertaken for the distributive study sample. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean and standard deviation scores, and Pearson correlation was applied to experiment with the typical relationship among different variables used to collect data. Different attributes page owner's use, and the responses they get towards their business from their customers are first analyzed, determining each variable's mean and standard deviations (SD).

Table 2 presents the statements' Mean and SD scores to analyze the responses page owners are getting from their customers during COVID-19. As demonstrated in Table 2, Customer queries have increased during COVID-19, yielding the highest mean score of 3.90. At the same time, they have not faced any trouble operating business during COVID-19 (M=2.60), generating the lowest mean value among all twelve variables. The number of returning customers is still the same (M=3.40), the Selling price of the products has not been reduced during COVID-19 (M=3.30), All contents from the page

reached the desired customers during COVID-19 (M=3.25), All contents in the page are getting enough engagement from the audience during COVID- 19 (M=3.20) produced more than moderate mean scores. (M=3.93), (M=2.77) was significantly low in comparison to other factors. Page boosting has been effective during COVID-19 (M=3.05) in the mid-range closest to neutral. No extra strategies were built to run the online business during COVID-19 (M=2.5), which was less than the moderate Mean level. Several fraud customers have not increased during COVID-19 (M=2.63), which was closer to the lowest Mean value.

Finally, after analyzing the entire survey, some noteworthy findings were found. Following is the summary of the findings:

- Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, Twitter, and LinkedIn are used in online business.
- Customers' queries on almost every page are at a high or moderate level during COVID-19.
- Most page owners are getting returning customers even during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Page owners have changed their strategy to attract new customers during COVID-19.
- Facebook's new changed policy during COVID-19 has been effective for most business owners. However, some people did not achieve that many responses from their audiences.
- Most page owners were not satisfied with their earnings from online business during COVID-19, indicating that the company is a win-game for some people who changed their business strategies during COVID-19.
- Almost all page owners agreed that they had reduced their products' prices to get a better response from their customers.
- The other two questions in the first part of the analysis proved that COVID-19 significantly impacts running online businesses. However, the page owners managed to get a good response from their customers.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this research is to analyze the responses online page owners are getting from customers to online businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. In today's world, online businesses have become the main source of income for many people. The success of their business depends on the response they get towards their business from customers. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Facebook pages for online businesses has increased tremendously. The main objective of this study was to analyze responses online business page owners are getting towards their business from customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reactions of various page owners were collected through a survey questionnaire to analyze the data. The best effort was given to gather information from the page owners who were relevant to the objectives of this study and summarize all of them within the paper. From this study, it has been found that the responses online business pages are getting towards their business from customers are high or moderate, and sales have increased during the COVID-19 period for most of the page owners. A maximum of the page owners have followed specific strategies to increase their sales and reduced their prices slidingly. To sum up the paper, it can be said that the response rate from customers towards online business during the COVID-19 pandemic is positive. Online business will only expand when customer queries and engagement are high towards a specific page or business. According to the findings of this study, some theoretical and practical implications can be recommendations that can improve customers' responses towards online business. Personal branding is essential for selling anything. Page owners need to brand themselves rather than market their products. Besides that, raw marketing is a part of personal branding. Boosting involves a lot of money so that people can do raw marketing; by being active on social media for a long time, they can attract most customers. Now, newcomers should spend much time building their page by building their fan base. Online business owners must create a good relationship with their clients to make them return customers. The study also analyzed the factors affecting customers' online buying behavior using various social media platforms running online businesses. However, the response was taken from a few customers, so the sample size is small, which is a limitation of this research. The findings of this research can be utilized for further studies, such as post-COVID customers' responses towards online business.

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