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**PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC FASHION CONSUMER AND BUSINESS
TRENDS**

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has had an impact on both consumers and businesses. It has shifted consumer preferences to enjoy nature more and be more aware of environmental issues than ever before. Many businesses suffered during the pandemic, but some thrived as consumer lifestyles and needs changed. This article looks at changes in the market and consumer behavior during the COVID-19 crisis as well as consumer and business trends following the epidemic. It primarily focuses on consumer positivity and sustainability, as well as a business emphasis on innovation, human capital, personalized consumer experience, and the importance of positivity, inclusivity, and diversity.

Key Words: COVID-19, consumer and market shift, business trend, positivity, personalization, inclusivity and diversity, and sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, all industries have suffered except those that are suitable for human life and business survival during the pandemic. Delivery services and grocery stores are two prime examples of businesses that prospered throughout the pandemic (Sharma, 2020). Other businesses that thrived during the epidemic include those selling recreational goods, food and beverage stores, health and personal care products, and garden equipment (Brewster, 2022). However, COVID-19 had an adverse impact on the bottom line and income of numerous industries including the fashion sector due to travel restrictions and worldwide store closures brought on by lockdowns (Zargani, 2021). Many long-standing companies worked to maintain their operations while many small firms failed. This article looks at consumer and business trends during COVID-19 and after the pandemic. The discussion's goal is to organize ideas about what consumers and fashion companies think is important as we move forward in the face of the ongoing pandemic.

CONSUMER AND MARKET TRENDS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of individuals stayed at home for work and recreation, which gave rise to unique fashion styles. Most people did not need to update their wardrobes due to the lockdowns. People spent most of their time at home. People favored loungewear, active wear, or sneakers that are more comfortable than business casual or dressy attire, as well as face masks, which were the most essential accessory during the epidemic (Tarlton, 2021). Active wear had already become widespread, but this was especially true during the period when everyone was compelled to stay inside. Sweatpants were a popular choice for remaining comfortable, as seen by the dramatic increase in sales of that product category. For instance, during the first week of COVID-19, Net-a-Porter recorded a 40 percent increase in overall sweatpants sales (Sidell, 2020).

Even if individuals are not getting ready for an evening out, according to Ariel Katz of Everybody, they are nonetheless suitably dressed (Sidell, 2020). The trend of dressing for virtual meetings was intriguing, though. The term “Zoom tops” is often used to describe shirts or blouses that are appropriate for Zoom video conversations (Tarlton, 2021). People tended to shop for tops or blouses during the COVID-19 that are suited for a meeting setting because they only reveal their upper body in video meetings. Dan Bartlett, executive vice president of corporate relations at Wal-Mart, claims that the company witnessed an uptick in sales of tops but not bottoms since customers are plainly more worried about their appearance from the waist up during video conferences (Bogage, 2020).

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development performed a global consumer survey that included both developed and developing countries like Brazil, China, Germany, Italy, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, South Africa, Switzerland, and Turkey. According to its data, online purchases have increased by six to ten percent across most product categories (UNCTAD, 2020). Both emerging markets and developed economies saw a greater emphasis on smaller, more frequent purchases from consumers. However, monthly internet spending per shopper has significantly decreased. The decrease, which was most severe in the tourism and travel sectors, where the average online consumer expenditure plummeted by 75 percent, did not spare the fashion (-43%) or the beauty (-32%) businesses (UNCTAD, 2020).

As the UNCTAD report indicated, the epidemic has sped up the shift to a society that is increasingly digital, from grocery shopping to many other consumer goods, including fashion and beauty items. According to the most recent Annual Retail Trade Survey (ARTS) report from the Census Bureau, e-commerce sales in the United States alone surged by \$244.2 billion, or 43 percent, from \$571.2 billion to \$815.4 billion in 2020, the year the epidemic started (Brewster, 2022). However, in line with the UNCTAD report, many brands saw overall sales decline despite a sharp increase in online sales. Valentino, an Italian designer of high-end fashion, also announced a 62 percent increase in online sales in 2020 (Zargani, 2021). Although internet sales accounted for 14 percent of all retail sales, they were unable to make a significant enough impact on overall sales. In 2020, the brand's overall revenue fell by 28 percent.

POST-COVID CONSUMER TRENDS

Happiness and Optimism

Experiencing the pandemic was difficult for anyone. Traumatic experiences included death, despair, anxiety, and extreme stress. Social gatherings were restricted, and family reunions were discouraged to stop the disease from spreading. The long depressing period encourages people to dress cheerfully and optimistically. Fashion in the post-COVID era is more upbeat and optimistic. Bright colors, floral, prints, and large silhouettes are major fashion trends (Sheppard, 2021). Everyone seeks to regain control of the situation by reviving themselves with cheery colors and vivacious shapes. It is more important than ever before for people to express themselves authentically.

Health, Comfort, and Sustainability

More than ever, individuals aim to be in good health. Further casualizing is made possible by the continued acceptance of more flexible lifestyles and dress rules by many businesses across numerous industries (Le Rolland, 2022). Anyone affected by the epidemic is highly concerned about their health and wellness. Everyone came to the realization that being in bad health has an impact on every aspect of our lives, especially after witnessing the painful effects of being unwell during the pandemic. Given the close connection between physical and mental wellness, many customers are more conscious of its significance (Le Rolland, 2022). Following their lockdown during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, consumers have expressed a growing desire to escape and explore nature. Many consumers are increasingly interested in outdoor activities such as park visits, hiking, running, and wildlife viewing. Such a focus on health, comfort, and wellness has accelerated purchasing decisions in sportswear, active wear, and loungewear (Khusainova, 2020).

Sustainability has gained popularity as a result of the importance of environmental protection in halting global climate change. The pandemic has made people value nature more since it is essential for both our physical and mental welfare to connect with nature. Environmental concerns are more prevalent than ever among consumers. Consumers are now generally aware of the environmental problems related to the production, use, and disposal of clothing. An increasing number of fashion companies are looking into more sustainable business methods, from product designs to supply chain management (Le Rolland, 2022). Utilizing consignment and resale shops is another consumer trend connected to ecological initiatives. Many well-known firms, including Patagonia, Lululemon, Hugo Boss, and Steve Madden, operate their own secondhand or repair venues in response to customer trends and environmental concerns. (Cernansky, 2022). Customers' desire to escape into nature, especially in the wake of the pandemic crisis, is a significant driver for businesses to make considerable environmental sustainability initiatives.

POST-COVID BUSINESS TRENDS

Major Business Foundations in a Globally Shifting Post-Pandemic Environment

The fashion industry has become oversaturated and competitive at multiple levels of consumer markets. In the face of escalating global competition, increasingly sophisticated customers, and digital innovation, exceeding the pace of best business practices is crucial for business success

and economic sustainability. Companies have become more strategically minded as a result of resource constraints and the need to be much more sustainable in the post-pandemic environment. Valentino asserted that it is essential to place more emphasis than ever on creativity, human resources, and customized client experiences (Zargani, 2021). The company highlighted these major pillars as a solid foundation for navigating a long-term, dynamic global environment. Consumers today are self-assured and appreciate any company that values individuality and imperfections. Every fashion company is required to embrace positivism, inclusion, and diversity in all elements of its business operations in order to recognize differences in body proportions as well as other aspects of the diversity of humankind. The key pillars that are vital to company success are discussed in the sections that follow.

Creativity and Innovation

Any business involved in the fashion industry needs to be creative and innovative to ensure future productivity and longevity. This is true for luxury brands in particular. Any level of business strategy and operations requires innovation and creativity. For instance, the highest level of sustainability demands innovative design concepts and production techniques that must be incorporated from the very beginning of the development process. Small firms, who frequently aim their marketing at a reasonably wealthy and committed core market, are increasingly relying on the promise of ethical and ecologically friendly products as a key appealing feature (Suen & Deeley, 2020). For such independent firms, incorporating practical sustainability is crucial to ensuring a customer base. Emerging brands are driven to figure out how to be less wasteful in order to survive in a post-pandemic environment where consumers are spending less and becoming more environmentally conscious (Suen & Deeley, 2020). Smaller brands are often in a better position than larger brands to experiment with more creative ideas and act quickly in an environment constrained by limited resources (Suen & Deeley, 2020).

Human Capital

It goes without saying that finding the right personnel is essential to implementing creativity and innovation across the board in corporate operations. The Saks Fifth Avenue president and CEO, Marc Metrick, was interviewed during the National Retail Federation (NRF)'s 2021 "Retail's Big Show." The people of the organization are where innovation begins. In today's fast-paced and cutthroat corporate environment, it is crucial to have the correct culture and environment where individuals may feel safe and comfortable offering ideas. It is crucial to hire people based

on their potential since the fashion industry requires people who can come up with new and innovative solutions to the difficulties it has been experiencing.

Personalized Customer Experiences

Achieving personalization is a goal shared by most brands. The NRF's Big Show interview with Marc Metrick stated that personalization is about how each unique client interacts with Saks, including questions like "Does she enjoy text, email, or a phone call?" and "Does she enjoy visiting the store?" Building individualized experiences is about putting the human connection that is essential to all of a brand's client connections at the center of everything it does. Although the pandemic has expedited consumer behavior and consumers are more at ease purchasing online than ever before, physical stores will always play a significant role in how a business engages and connects with its customers.

Positivity, Inclusivity, and Diversity

Customers now expect brands to be positive, diverse, and inclusive and react with intolerance when they are not. Idealized body images were once favored, and many firms focused their marketing and advertising efforts on projecting such perfections. The best illustration is Victoria's Secret, which was once well-known for having Angels display the ideal feminine looks. The lack of diversity at Victoria's Secrets has regularly drawn criticism (Hanbury, 2018). Ed Razek, the CMO of L Brands, the parent company of Victoria's Secret, received criticism from the public after saying in an interview with Vogue that the company did not use transgender or plus-size models because those demographics did not align with their preferences (Asare, 2018). Despite a public apology and attempts to make apologies, Razek resigned in 2019 and its once-famous fashion show was canceled. The CEO of the company also resigned after only two years on the job. An uproar from the public taught the brand a lesson through declining sales and popularity. It now uses a wider variety of body types in its advertisements, and it no longer offers its contentious fashion shows with Angels. After receiving years of criticism, Victoria's Secret said that the Angels were culturally irrelevant and has subsequently worked to improve the image of its brand (Hanbury, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Following the serious stage of COVID-19, fashion companies are dealing with significantly more challenging business conditions. The onset of COVID-19 was difficult for both consumers and businesses. Consumers witnessed or experienced traumatic events and were locked down, affecting every aspect of their lives. Following the pandemic, consumers want to live happy and healthy lives, which has led them to value nature and sustainability. Understanding and fulfilling consumer demands and wants are critical for fashion brands in the process of developing products, marketing activities, and product offerings. To build strong relationships with their customers and assure future success, fashion companies place a higher emphasis on creativity and innovation, human capital, individualized customer experiences, as well as optimism, inclusivity, and diversity. The pandemic is still going on, but things are considerably better now that there are vaccines and treatments for the disease. Consumers and businesses will still be affected, and it will have an impact on many facets of daily life and corporate operations. Customers want a cleaner atmosphere, less physical interactions, and companies that care about both their customers and the environment. Customers learned how to live meaningfully. Businesses that were smart and agile were able to survive the hardship, but many others failed. Businesses learned how to be smarter, more efficient, and more impactful, and they will continue to serve their customers in more meaningful, productive, and sustainable ways.

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