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Identifying consumer behavior influence on fashion retailing in the COVID-19 pandemic situation

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Abstract

Aim: The current research aims include analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on consumer behavior patterns in the fashion retail sector, determining how the level of buyer awareness influences consumer purchase behavior, and assessing the impact of online services on consumer behavior patterns in the fashion retail sector. There needs to be more research done on how fashion retail brands can best adjust to the new normal, as well as the demand for local brands, in the face of online marketing difficulties both during and after the lockdown.
Methodology: The city of Kandy, located in Sri Lanka's hill country, served as a focal fashion for the research because it is home to both fashion consumers and the 10 fashion brands examined in the study. Qualitative and quantitative techniques were used in this study's data collection, organization, and analysis. Online shopping has been identified as a trend that has signaled a rapid increase due to changes in consumer behavior and the new trends of retailers.
Research Results: A majority of shoppers (51.7%, to be exact) plan to keep making their purchases online going forward, according to the data. A subset of consumers prefer traditional commerce, but they have been forced to adapt to new trade methods based on online purchasing, and this trend is expected to persist in the future. This study's findings lend credence to the behavior that consumers' responses to a pandemic will be complex and multifaceted. Retailers in the fashion industry will need to pay close attention to consumer preferences and adjust their stock and marketing strategies in light of the new restrictions on discretionary spending.
Implications/Novel Contribution: Suggestions could be used to improve the fashion retail industry in Sri Lanka so that it can keep up with digital advancements in the future and endure when unforeseen events, such as a lockdown or global pandemic, strike the country.
Keywords: Fashion, Retailers, Pandemic, Consumer, Behavior, Online shopping

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INTRODUCTION

Lockdown and the subsequent outbreak of a previously unknown coronavirus profoundly affected people's daily lives all over the consumer. It's not shocking that businesses across the board were impacted. After the crisis, many industries suffered massive losses and experienced significant uncertainty (Debnath, 2020). When contemplating the worldwide pandemic, the fashion industry may not be the first thing on your mind after thousands of lives have been lost. Still, I felt the effects of fashion immediately. Retailers may be forced to get creative to meet customers' needs and want if a new pandemic situation arises, the likes of which have never been seen (Brydges & Hanlon, 2020). There will be lingering changes in social norms and attitudes in Sri Lanka long after the effects of COVID-19 have faded. The increasingly competitive fashion industry has accounted for social distance and the rise of online shopping. While the economy was in shambles, people still made sure to take care of themselves and their families.

It is anticipated that the global apparel market will grow from $1.3 trillion in 2015 to $1.5 trillion in 2020, indicating a growing demand for clothing and footwear around the world (Neminno & Gempes, 2018; Shahbandeh, 2021). Even though the Asia-Pacific region saw the highest level of growth at 4% (Shahbandeh, 2021; Ray, 2019), analysts expect the geographic distribution of the apparel industry's interest share to remain stable throughout the forecast period. The European Union's 28 member states, the United States, and China are the world's three largest apparel markets. A 2017 study by Shahbandeh (2021) showed that activewear captured 6.8 percent of the global market growth.

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Every day, people fight against yet another threat whose nature is unknown and changing rapidly. They must remain in their home for the foreseeable future. Due to the calamity, there have been significant shifts in family dynamics, travel restrictions, and a dampening of leisure and social activities (Alatrash, 2018; Serafini et al., 2020).

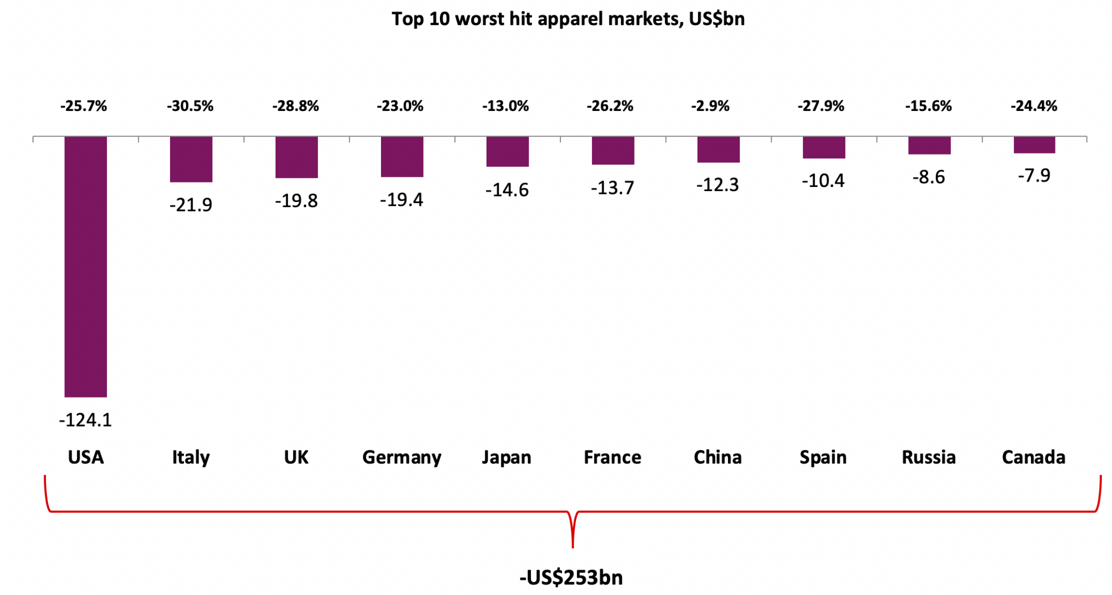

Figure 1. COVID-19 to cut global apparel market by US$ in 2020

Figure 1 shows the 10 worst-hit global apparel markets in terms of value in US$. The value and percentage declines show the variance between 2020 forecasts and 2019 market sizes (Just Style, 2021).

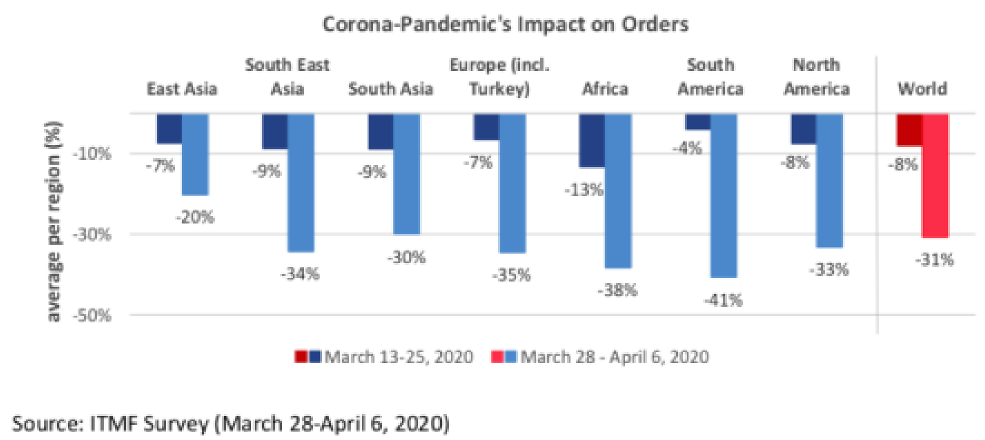

Figure 2. COVID-19 and the fashion apparel industry

Figure 2 shows statistics about a survey of 700 companies conducted by the International Textile Manufacturers Federation (ITMF) between 28 March and 6 April 2020, shows that companies in all regions of the world suffered significant numbers of cancellations and/or postponements of orders. Globally, current orders dropped by 31% on average. The severity of the decrease ranges from 20.0% in East Asia to 41% in South America.

Objectives and Problem Identification

The researchers conducted their study during the New Year celebrations period in April, when shopping is prominent in the Sri Lankan social context, to understand consumer behavior during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study's overarching fashion is to examine how COVID-19 has affected consumer behavior in the fashion retail sector. More specifically, researchers want to know how the virus has influenced shoppers' online browsing and consumption habits and how shoppers' awareness levels affect their consumer decisions. More research is needed to determine the best course of action for fashion retail brands to take in light of the new normal and the need for locally sourced brands in the face of the difficulties inherent in online marketing both during and after the lockdown.

Several studies were carried out after the pandemic hit Sri Lanka to examine the modifications in consumer behavior. It has had a noticeable effect on the fashion industry and fashion retailers and contributed to the dramatic rise in the number of people making purchases online. So, it's important to investigate the root causes of this phenomenon in Sri Lanka.

Significance of the Study

Among the studies carried out at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on people and their behavioral patterns studied by Anner (2020), Brydges and Hanlon (2020), Cohen (2019) Debnath (2020), He et al. (2014), Morawska and Cao (2020), Paton (2021), Pandey and Kumari (2020) Rodríguez-López, Rubio-Valdehita, and Díaz-Ramiro (2021), Serafini et al. (2020), J. Sheth (2020) Watanabe, Omori, et al. (2020) a study which explored the change in consumer preferences about fashion business during a lockdown of the country, online consumption, and its impact on fashion retailers is a dearth of research. Anner (2020) reveals buying behavior after the pandemic in the Sri Lankan context, but it does not focus on or speak about the fashion industry.

This behavior sheds light on how consumers react and what they prefer during a pandemic, which has implications for the future of the fashion consumer in Sri Lanka. The benefits of technology-driven strategies and social media advertising are also highlighted in light of the study's findings about the increasing demand for online content. In addition, the study highlights the behavior of shoppers' preferences in the fashion retail consumer during a cultural festival in Sri Lanka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19: In the World Context

An unknown cause of pneumonia was first detected in the Chinese province of Wuhan in early November 2019. In December 2019, a cluster of 27 pneumonia cases emerged in Wuhan (Hubei, China), with a common exposure to a wholesale market for seafood, fish, and live animals. The first cases were associated with a virus which was believed to be of animal origin. On 7th January 2020, Chinese authorities identified as the causative agent of this outbreak a new virus of the Coronaviridae family, which was later named SARS-CoV-2. Chinese authorities shared the genetic sequence on 12 January. On 11 February 2020, the WHO (World Health Organization) called the disease COVID-19 by consensus. The spread of the infection was, however, almost entirely driven by human-to-human transmission in the province by December 2019 Barrios and Hochberg (2020), Kirk and Rifkin (2020). The Emergency Committee of the Health Regulations International (ECHRI) declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of Major International (PHEMI) at its meeting on 30 January 2020. Subsequently, the WHO recognized it as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Brydges & Hanlon, 2020).

Scientists have theorized that both droplets and aerosols generated from non-violent and violent expirations of SARS-CoV-2-contaminated individuals might be responsible for the airborne transmission of COVID-19 disease (Jayaweera, Perera, Gunawardana, & Manatunge, 2020). Social distancing and hand washing are the fundamental measures suggested by the World Health Organization (WHO) to abstain from contracting COVID-19. Tragically, these deliberate diseases do not forestall disease by inhalation of small droplets exhaled by an infected person that can travel meters in the air all around and carry the viral content (Morawska & Cao, 2020).

Science clarifies the mechanisms of such transport and there is proof that this is a noteworthy course of disease in indoor conditions. Despite this, no countries, specialists, or authorities consider airborne spread of COVID-19 in their guidelines to forestall infection transmission indoors (Morawska & Cao, 2020). It is in this way critical, that the public national authorities acknowledge the reality that the virus spreads through air and suggest that sufficient control measures be executed to prevent further spread of the SARS-CoV-2 infection, in particular evacuation of the virus-laden droplets from indoor air by ventilation (Morawska & Cao, 2020).

Coronavirus is simultaneously a public health crisis and a real-time experiment in scaling back the consumer economy. While it might appear to be both fanciful and insolent, Coronavirus is an opportunity to decrease over the long term the predominance of ways of life prefaced on large volumes of energy and material throughput. At the same time, goals for social distancing to bring down the risk of network transmission will regrettably fortify responsibilities to individualized rather than public and shared methods of consumption. Regardless of what shows up to be an increasingly dire public health crisis, policy makers should attempt to guarantee that the COVID-19 outbreak contributes to a sustainable consumption transition (Cohen, 2019).

In addition, according to the theory of psychological reaction (Clee & Wicklund, 1980), consumers experience a threat to the availability of goods as a loss of control and increasing the perceived need for the threatened object. Therefore, ownership restores this lack of power and leads to a sense of security and comfort (Echchakoui, 2016). Today, the entire world is facing a second wave of infections by COVID-19. Data from Eurostat and national statistical agencies (Scotland: NRS, Northern Ireland: NISRA, Germany: Destatis) show that deaths by COVID-19 in the second wave are higher than in the first wave (Rodríguez-López et al., 2021).

COVID-19: In Sri Lankan Context

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and upgraded the outbreak to Pandemic status by March 11. Over 1.3 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported worldwide as of the morning of April 6, 2020, resulting in nearly 75,000 deaths (Barrios & Hochberg, 2020). The first confirmed case of the virus was reported in Sri Lanka on 27 January 2021, a 44-year-old Chinese tourist from Hubei Province and on 10 March, the first Sri Lankan local national tested positive for COVID-19. A 52-year-old tour guide working with a group of Italians had tested positive. Several other cases followed. On March 10, the Sri Lankan government established the Coronavirus Task Force. The first reported case involving a Sri Lankan origin outside Sri Lanka was reported in Italy on 3 March 2020. As of 23 March, forty-five quarantine centers have been built in the country by the Sri Lanka Army as a preventive measure to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. Mar 27, 2020 Presidential Task Force established to combat COVID. The Ministry of Health confirmed that "no known exposure to the virus through travel or close contact with a known infected individual" marks the beginning of the spread of the disease in the community (World Health Organization, 2020).

Nearly 3,500 people have been under quarantine in 45 quarantine centers which also include 31 foreigners from 14 countries. As of 25 March 2020, Sri Lankan authorities have tracked down over 14,000 people who had contacted the identified patients and had ordered self-quarantine for such people. As of 16 April 2020, Sri Lanka has been named as 16th high risk country prone to virus pandemic. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka has been ranked 9th best country in the world for its successful immediate response on tackling the virus. The Sri Lankan government announced that it lifted the curfew on 11 May which was in effect for over two months which brings an end to the 52-day lockdown style curfew and meaning that the public can start going to the workplace by maintaining social distancing but the public gatherings, festivals and celebrations are banned (World Health Organization, 2020).

Consumer Behavior after COVID-19

It was noted that there were many peculiar trends of consumer behavior that the early days of the pandemic of COVID-19 came to dominate. Identified that, as customers become aware of the those who first respond to the potential for a pandemic by seeking to protect themselves against perceived threats and regain control of lost freedoms. When time passes, they cope by exerting power and developing new habits in other domains. Eventually, by being less reactive and more resilient, consumers adapt over time (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). Kirk and Rifkin (2020) states that at the end of February and early March, however, a surge of preparedness purchasing rapidly transformed into intense purchasing with an 845 percent rise in customer household spending at a pace that manufacturers could not achieve, leading to empty shelves, stock-outs and product shortages (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020).

As indicated by Wang (2015) the progression of data with respect to a specific change in the environment influences the consumer behavior in an enormous way, then again Voinea and Filip (2011) noticed that the frequency and accessibility of products/services can impact the manner in which a customer behaves; when a specific thing is scarce and not accessible; clients will in general tend to maintain a strategic distance from the difficulty of searching for the respective item (He et al., 2014). Perceptions of risk are a central component of behavioral change theories

(Cohen, 2020). It has been of critical interest to policymakers and academics to understand how people shape and update their expectations, and thus their behavioral choices, especially economic behavior (Barrios & Hochberg, 2020).

Currently, there is a big change in the habits, media, demand and means to get the data for the consumers. Changes of media patterns make the customers moreover change their habits in time, space, and substance. As expected, the users develop from focusing on the night in traditional PC era to any extra time; In space, the utilization scenarios of consumers extend from home and office in customary PC time to outdoor, transportation, recreational time and other spaces, and they utilize distinctive media devices for entertainment, chatting, shopping, and so forth; Accordingly, the users begin to have a variety of demands and habits about various devices, so the media is further divided (Wang, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown and social distancing directives have disrupted the consumer habits of purchasing just as shopping. Customers are figuring out how to improvise and learn new tendencies changing their usual habits. For instance, consumers cannot go to the store, so the store must come to home. While consumers return to old habits, almost certainly, they will be modified by new guidelines and procedures in the manner consumers shop and purchase items and services. New habits will likewise rise by technology advances, changing demographics and innovative ways buyers have figured out how to adapt to obscuring the work, leisure, and education boundaries (J. Sheth, 2020).

All consumption is area and time bound. Purchasers create propensities over time about what to consume, when and where, (J. Sheth, 2020) and a second significant driver of consumer behavior is technology (J. N. Sheth & Sisodia, 1999). The lockdown and social distancing to battle the Coronavirus infection has created huge interruptions on consumer behavior (J. Sheth, 2020). All consumption is time bound and area bound. As people work at home, study at home, and relax at home the work-life limits are currently obscured. The shops have come to the doors of the consumers. As customers adjust to the house arrest for a drawn-out timeframe, they are probably going to adopt newer and up to date technologies which encourage work study and consumption in a more helpful way. New and modified habits have emerged with embracing digital technologies.

Sri Lankan buyers expect to proceed with their price conscious purchasing behavior even after the crisis. A quarter of a year of lock-down would have shaped some solid opinions about the spending decisions of purchasers. Advertisers will face a tough time re-persuading the value delivery side of their brands, to a market comprising mostly price-conscious buyers. While it may seem both fanciful and insolent, COVID-19 is an opportunity to reduce over the longer term the prevalence of lifestyles premised on large volumes of energy and material throughput. At the same time, imperatives for social distancing to lower the risk of community transmission will regrettably reinforce commitments to individualized rather than public and shared modes of consumption. Despite what appears to be an increasingly dire public health emergency, policy makers should work to ensure that the coronavirus outbreak contributes to a sustainable consumption transition (Cohen, 2020).

Fashion Identified as Non-Essential Retailer Doors

Because of public health concerns and social distancing measures (Koren & Pető, 2020), within days, governments across the world requested the closure of non-essential retail, which also includes fashion retail shops (Anner, 2020). After shutting their doors, numerous retailers turned to online sales (Howland, 2020), started raising funds for global foundations, and created plans to help employees (Brydges & Hanlon, 2020). In 2019, fashion retailing suffered a 20% drop in revenue compared to 2007, and experts estimate an additional 3540% drop in 2020. The impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on fashion retailing is immediate: more than 65,000 people from fashion retailing will lose their jobs due to the closure of sales points and the disappearance of smaller businesses. The Spanish government allowed shops and shopping centers to open under multiple restrictions to reactivate fashion retail economically (Rodríguez-López et al., 2021).

Psychological Impact on Consumers

This pandemic has affected everyones daily lives. At least 316 million people in 42 states of the US have been asked to stay at home, and subsequently, businesses have been susceptible to transition into virtual workplaces or laying off employees. Many employees have been quick to adjust to the digital transformation. Online video conference software Zoom reports a 78% growth in profits, and Google Meet reports an approximately 60% increase in user traffics, where people spend 2 billion minutes in online meetings every day (Kim, 2020). In literature, an emerging paradigm suggests that people exhibit considerable heterogeneity in expectations (Barrios & Hochberg, 2020). The consumer has the perception that online shopping is convenient, selection, and ease in shopping. In developing countries' prices, quality, durability, and other product-related qualities are important in a purchase decision. Besides the price, perceived usefulness is also considered as an important factor in online purchase decisions. Also, identified perceived usefulness as the important factor however, Aghdaie, Piraman, and Fathi (2011) have found no significant effect of perceived usefulness in online purchase decisions by consumers (Watanabe et al., 2020). The modern world in which all individuals can rapidly travel and communicate has been rarely forced to the current social isolation and restrictions which are linked to feelings of frustration and uncertainty. This unprecedented situation related to COVID-19 outbreak is clearly demonstrating that individuals are largely and emotionally unprepared for the detrimental effects of biological disasters that are directly showing how everyone may be frail and helpless (Serafini et al., 2020).

Impact on Fashion Industry and Retail Sector

At the point when COVID-19 hit, the effect on the fashion industry was immediate. Brydges and Hanlon (2020) Moving forward, it is visible that fashion faces an uncertain future. It may change, though retail workers, many who work in profoundly problematic business circumstances, were upheld in the beginning of the pandemic. While in some of their distribution warehouses, a few brands have been caught violating social distancing policies, others have been blamed for firing laborers during the pandemic who may have engaged in some other activities (Paton, 2021). Even though the Spanish GDP increased by 16.5% after the end of the state of national emergency, the second waves appearance has led to maintaining these pessimistic predictions. Thus, due to this second wave, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development estimated a 12.8% drop in Spains GDP by December with a higher impact on the retail sector and the tourism sector. By now, 33,000 businesses have disappeared, and large companies have not managed to trace their sales (Rodríguez-López et al., 2021).

Online Consumption

The spread of novel (COVID-19) infection has prompted considerable changes in consumption patterns. While the demand for services that include face-to-face contact has diminished strongly, online consumption of products and services, for example, through e-commerce, is expanding. First, the fundamental gathering liable for the expansion in online consumption are buyers who were at that point acquainted with online consumption prior to the pandemic and bought products and services both online and offline (Watanabe et al., 2020). Online consumption is more convenient than over-the-counter purchases in a number of respects. The first is a reduction in transportation costs in the sense that one does not have to physically go to the store. Transportation cost savings also include cost savings in the sense that one does not have to carry what one bought. The second is the reduction in search costs. The internet is full of different products and services, and the variety of products and services offered is more diverse than that offered at physical stores. There is also a large variety of prices. The internet makes it easy to compare the quality and prices of products one wants to buy. While for the period before the coronavirus pandemic, studies by Einav et al. (2017) and Jo, Matsumura, and Weinstein (2019) examining the increase in consumer utility (consumer surplus) through the advantages of online consumption such as the reduction in transportation costs and the increase in product variety find that the gain in consumer surplus is equivalent to 1% of personal consumption (Watanabe et al., 2020). However, if online consumption is so attractive, all consumers should have switched to online consumption regardless of the pandemic; yet this is not the case. In addition, the degree of adoption of online consumption varies widely across countries and regions and is relatively low in Japan compared to the United States, Europe, China, and South Korea. Online consumption requires upfront costs such as the purchase of devices, maintaining internet access, and acquiring know-how, and such costs are regarded as one of the factors impeding the spread of online consumption. However, if the coronavirus outbreak led many consumers to make these upfront investments, they would have no reason to return to offline consumption after the pandemic (Watanabe et al., 2020). These consumers expanded the portion of online spending in their overall spending and/or potentially halted offline consumption completely and changed to online purchasing only (Torry, 2020). Second, a few shoppers that had never utilized the internet for purchases began to utilize the web for their consumption activities because of COVID-19 (Watanabe et al., 2020).

Opportunities and Challenges of Online Marketing after COVID-19

Italy was the first European country to exhibit alarming data on the viruss lack of control However, the Italian infection curve was only a week or two ahead of developments in Austria, Spain, Switzerland, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Thus, Italy and Spain were the first and worst affected countries in Europes first wave of COVID-19. According to the National Institute of Statistics, in the first wave caused by COVID-19 in Spain (between January and May), 45,684 people died from this disease. In addition to the 45,684 deaths due to CoViD-19, doctors certified another 4218 cases in which the cause of death was not directly the disease, although the virus contributed as a comorbidity (Rodríguez-López et al., 2021).

In June 2020, the state of national emergency in Spain ended with devastating consequences for the Spanish economy. During the lockdown, the Spanish GDP (Gross Domestic Product) dropped 22.1%. The International Monetary Fund estimated a 12.8% drop in Spains GDP by the end of 2020 and a 6.3% recovery in 2021. On the other hand, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimated an 11.114.4% drop in Spains GDP and a 57.5% recovery in 2021. 71% of Spanish entrepreneurs described their economic situation as bad or very bad (Rodríguez-López et al., 2021).

The coronavirus has affected every aspect of the business, e-commerce, technology, transport, and logistics globally. It has changed consumer behavior and product consuming patterns. Now they focus only on necessity products within the limited access to the market. Many small retail shops are closed and the medium and larger shops are suffering from the crisis of consumers (Pandey & Kumari, 2020). Logistic and transport constraints are also raised in the market, import and export have been reduced. During the lockdown, many industries are in the process of shut down, and in turn, there is a crisis of product. So, the demand and supply on both sides are badly affected due to the outbreak of the epidemic. During the lockdown due to the COVID 19 outbreak, every business has been hampered including the retail sector and online marketing also. Only the necessities products are available in the local retail market where the people use to purchase with proper care & maintaining social distancing. But they are also facing a shortage of products due to limited availability. In such crisis consumers are very much looking towards online marketing in the present scenario of lockdown. But online marketing and ecommerce are also suffering from the supply side crunch due to closure of factories and a negative impact on the import of products and disruption in the supply chain. However, it is estimated that retail online marketing will increase its market share after COVID 19. A study with a detailed survey is conducted to study the consumer behavior and product consuming pattern in India during the lockdown for the COVID 19 outbreak (Pandey & Kumari, 2020).

In the third week of March, Amazon announced that it would stop the sale of non-essential items in India, it only focuses on essential needs. Amazon has followed the same strategy in another country, Wal-Mart owned Flipkart suspended some of its services on its e-commerce platform (Pandey & Kumari, 2020). Online transactions are certainly more beneficial with more uses. Another crucial change witnessed in increasing adoption of delivery of medicine, health, wellness, and education is the solution available online to assist. The outbreak of the coronavirus and consequent lockdown has accelerated the adoption of online services and possibly created a long-term behavioral change in the way people shop. But marketers are facing challenges of the supply chain, inventory, lack of manufacturing items, and lack of raw material but still they are working well with available potential in its tough time. However, many retailers including Fashion, footwear, malls, restaurants, hotel industries are facing a significant worsening, very heavy drop in sales. They try to adopt new ways to reach the customer (Pandey & Kumari, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Study Context

There has been an obvious change in the behavioral patterns of the Sri Lankans when it comes to the Fashion industry after COVID-19 pandemic. Sri Lanka is a multi-cultural, multi ethnic country with a diversity in every region. It has 4 ethnic groups which is Sinhalese (74.9%), Sri Lankan Tamil (11.2%), Sri Lankan Moors (9.2%), Indian Tamil (4.2%), other (0.5%). The religious groups consist of Buddhist (official) 70.2%, Hindu 12.6%, Muslim 9.7%, Roman Catholic 6.1%, other Christian 1.3%, other 0.05%. Sri Lankas population practices a variety in several aspects and its about 21.8 million (Index Mundi, 2019) People with 15-54 age categories (62%) and secondary categories. 0-14 (26%) is the largest from the age groups in Sri Lanka (Central Bank, 2012).

The Kandy city which UNESCO (Sacred City of Kandy -UNESCO TV/NHK Nippon Hoso Kyokai) named a World Heritage Centre, is sacred Buddhist site, popularly known as the city of Senkadagalapura, and was the last capital of the Sinhala Kings whose patronage enabled the traditional culture to flourish for more than 2,500 years until the occupation of Sri Lanka by the British in 1815. It is also the site of the Temple of the Tooth Relic (the sacred tooth of the Buddha), which is a famous pilgrimage site. Coningham and Lewer (1999) The city has a culture which is formed over 346 years (1469-1815 AD) (Silva, 2005). The people of Kandy have been practicing a cultural fashion style over years and the change of their attitudes and biased or unbiased demand patterns can directly affect the retailers. Out of the total population within the Kandy Municipal Council limits, 48.59% are male and 51.41% are female. The proportion of the total population divided by age is 22.59% for children under 15, 22.49%, for those aged 15 - 29, 40.07% for those aged 30-59 and 14.83% for the elderly population over 60 years (Department of Statistics, 2011).

Methods

The primary data collected through 3 methods: shop visits and observation, an online questionnaire survey, and interviews. This research adopted both qualitative and quantitative research methods, as this methodology gives a more prominent understanding of the problem and improves the uprightness of findings. An online structured questionnaire was designed by using google forms. Tested by sending the questionnaire through social media platforms to a selected group of consumers based in Kandy.

This research adjusted both qualitative and quantitative research strategies, as this methodology gives more prominent understanding into the problem and improves the uprightness of findings. Original data were gathered through expert interviews and questioning the focused groups. This was based on 10 leading fashion stores in the vicinity of Kandy city and consumers around Kandy.

To collect the primary data after facing the pandemic in this study, there were 3 data collection methods utilized, from the shop visits and observation, online questionnaire survey and interviews. Two online structured questionnaires were designed by using google forms including close ended questions followed by the impact of consumer purchase behavior in the retail sector. Tested by sending the questionnaire through social media platforms to a selected group of consumers based in Kandy. Semi-structured interviews with 10 selected consumers and 10 retail shop managers/assistant managers of the region, in order to get an idea of the current situation after the pandemic from their point of view and to learn about the future changes in the industry after facing a global pandemic.

Expert Interviews

Expert interviews were conducted with managers and assistant managers of 10 main fashion retailers in Kandy to gain insight on how COVID-19 has impacted their business, their response to measures undertaken with the lockdown period and what they did in order to meet consumer needs during the lockdown in the New year season. These experts have been chosen to ensure a marketing point of view and questions asked through a structured discussion guide encouraged experts to explain their understanding of how the consumption pattern and attitudes of behavior of consumers of Sri Lanka has changed over a sudden situation like a global pandemic in a festive season where they purchase the most.

Focus Groups

Collection of primary data

The series of shop visits was made to fashion outlets of main retailer brands in the Kandy city area (shops located in Kandy City Centre and nearby outlets) and questioned their overall opinion about the experience after pandemic and conducted face to face interviews with the managers to get records during the month June and July 2020. The objective of the visits was to get facts, compare them from each retailer brand, to get their response to the pandemic, how each outlet reacted and changed with the social distancing practices and health concerns given by the government. Furthermore, buying behavior of consumers was noted at each fashion outlet. The verdicts were documented in a sheet.

Primary data collection regarding the consumer behavior was carried out focusing on classifying the perception of the consumers on the impact of the pandemic on fashion retailers. This was conducted through the close-ended questionnaire by sharing the forms with friends, colleagues, students, professors, and known people around Kandy city, and also, they were invited along with the form to share the survey link to as many people as possible according to their convenience and comfort. First the survey was conducted among 209 respondents in Kandy. (Debnath, 2020).

The research was done considering 10 main Sri Lankan fashion retailers named A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J and their responses to practice health instructions were highlighted. As an example, 8 outlets out of 10 didnt allow Fittons' ' giving priority to sanitation.

Collection of secondary data

Secondary data was collected from the internet, various published reports, scholarly reviews, journals, magazines, news articles, and newspapers and helped a lot to frame the literature review.

Limitations

One major limitation is that study is limited to those people, who had personal android smartphones, activated email Ids and the proper ability to learn English and respond in that manner. This study targets an educated population of Kandy city, so it should not be generalized to the whole population. For further studies, the awareness level of buyers, delayed online services and huge price rise of products during COVID-19 situation faced by uneducated people may be different from the findings and analysis of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were 16 questions based on consumer behavior during the lockdown period. The major findings of the research are explained below.

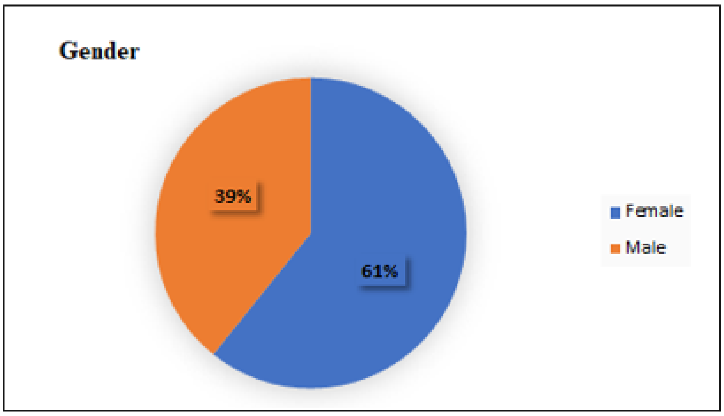

Figure 3. Gender of the respondents

Figure 3 explains the sample distribution based on gender. Out of 209 respondents, 39% were male and 60% was female which is the majority. When compared to men the majority which is female from the population who are fashion conscious have participated in responding to the respective questionnaire.

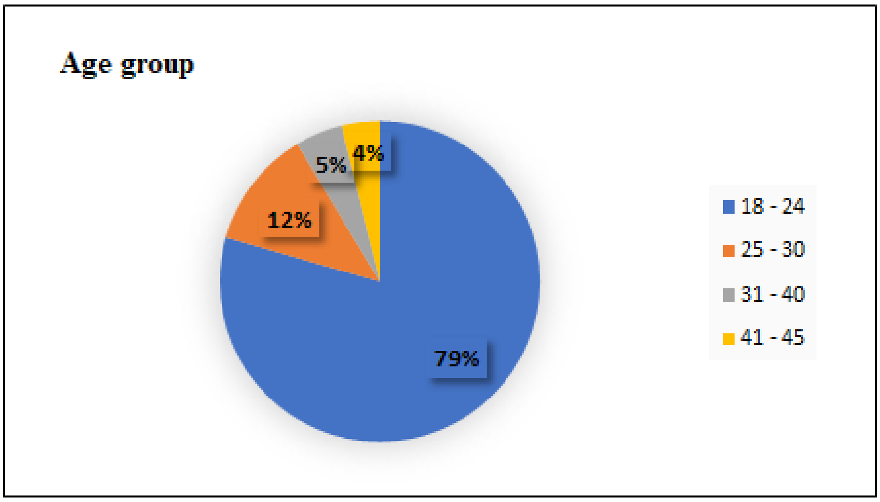

Figure 4. Age of the respondents

Figure 4 shows percentages of the particular respondents from different age groups. According to the answers 79.4% of total respondents were in the age group of 18 to 24, 12% were from the age group of 25 to 30 and remaining was from the age group of 31 to 45.

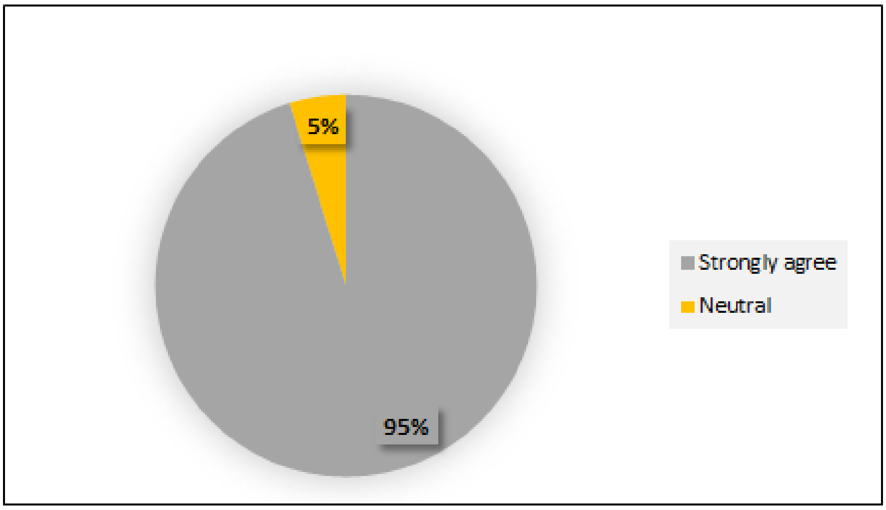

Figure 5. Awareness of the respondents on safety measures undertaken due to Corona pandemic

Figure 5 shows the majority of the respondents were aware of the safety measures and 95.2% of total respondents strongly agreed.

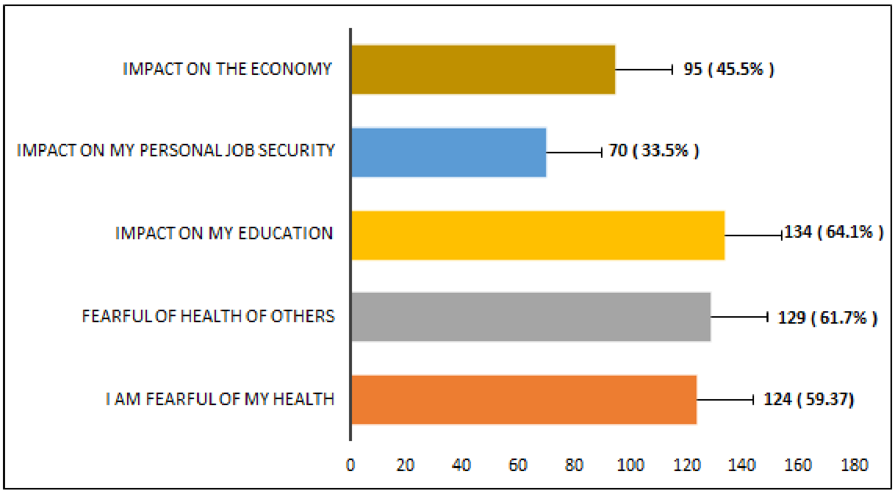

Figure 6. Concerns of the respondents during the lockdown

Figure 6 illustrates the most concerning areas of consumers' perception about the lock-down and impacted areas were identified. This indicates 59.3% of total respondents were fearful of their health and 61.7% were fearful of the health of others. As 79.4% of the respondents were in the age group of 18 to 24, the majority of 64.1% were from those who were concerned about the impact on education, 33.5% were concerned about the impact on personal job security and 45.5% were concerned about the impact on the economy.

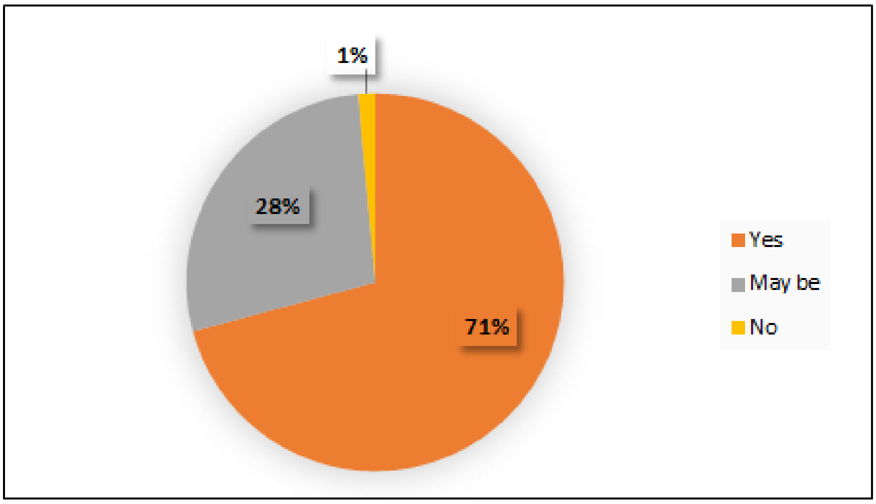

Figure 7. Awareness of the respondents about the effect of Covid-19 on Sri Lankan fashion industry

Figure 7 demonstrates that 70.8% believe Covid-19 will affect the Sri Lankan fashion industry and 27.8% have answered as it may affect and only a few say Covid-19 will not affect the fashion industry.

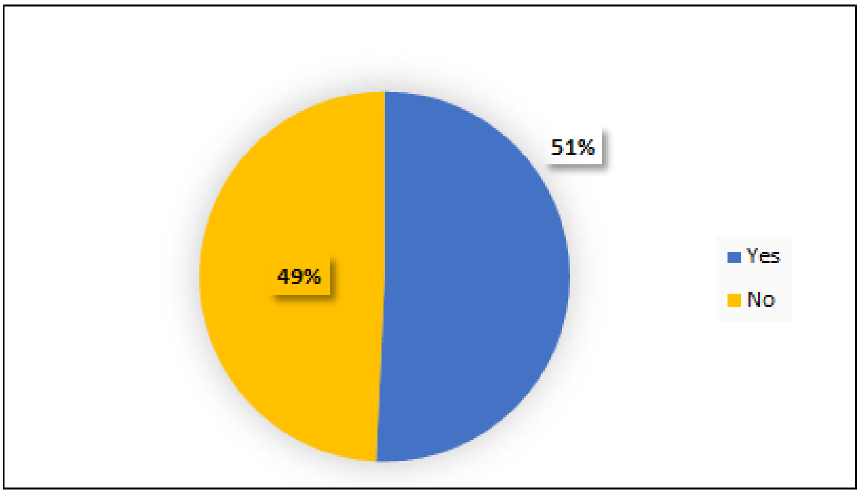

Figure 8. Awareness of the day-to-day clothing style of the respondents during the lock-down

Figure 8 shows the awareness of day-to-day clothing style during the lockdown. The majority of 50.7% were aware of their day-to-day clothing style which depicts their concern on fashion during a globally affected situation and 49.3% have answered as they were not aware of their day-to-day clothing style during the lock-down.

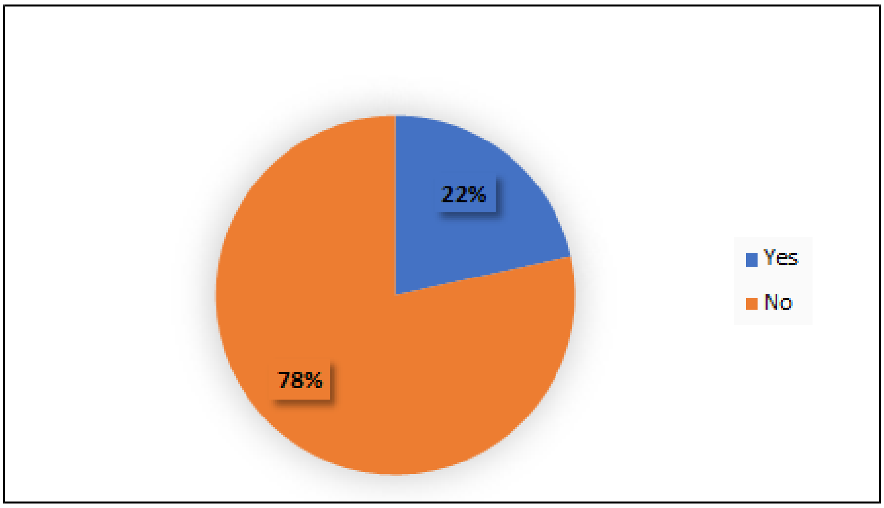

Figure 9. Behavior of the respondents before Pandemic considering the upcoming new year season

Figure 9 depicts whether consumers bought any clothes before the pandemic for the new year season 2020. Before the implementation of a curfew in their living area, 78.5% of consumers say that they did not buy any clothes before the pandemic and 21.5% have bought their clothes for the New years season knowing there will be a lockdown in Sri Lanka.

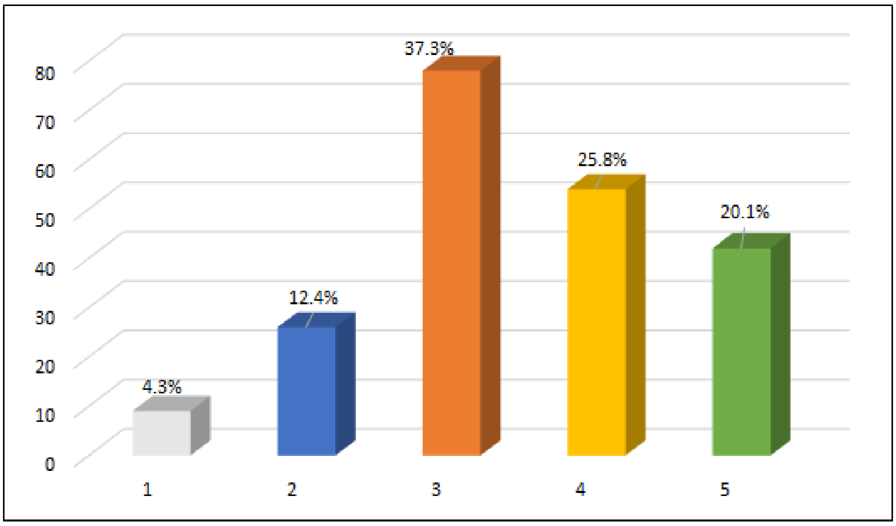

Figure 10. Change of the Spending habits of the respondents in the past few months

Figure 10 illustrates the change of the spending habits of the consumers in the past few months starting from 1 (not at all) to 5 (changed drastically), 37.3% answered neutrally about their spending, 25.8% says that their spending habits changed and 20.2% says that their spending habits changed drastically in the past few months. Only 4.3% say that their spending habits did not change at all due to the COVID-19 situation.

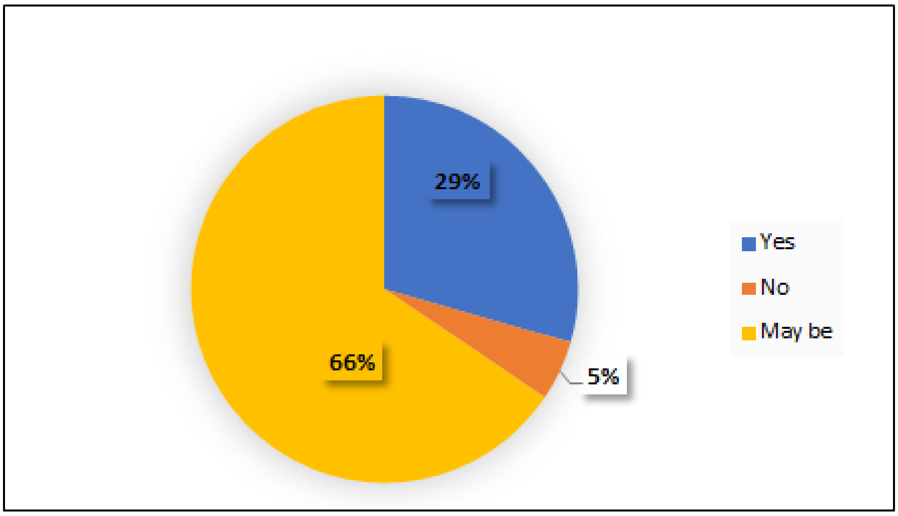

Figure 11. Change of the Spending habits of the respondents in the past few months

Requested answers, whether consumers think the path of Sri Lankan fashion retailing will change due to the pandemic and whether they were aware of it. Figure 10 highlighted that out of 209 respondents 66% believe that the path of Sri Lankan fashion retailing may change and 29% said yes, while a few (5%) believe it may not change after COVID-19.

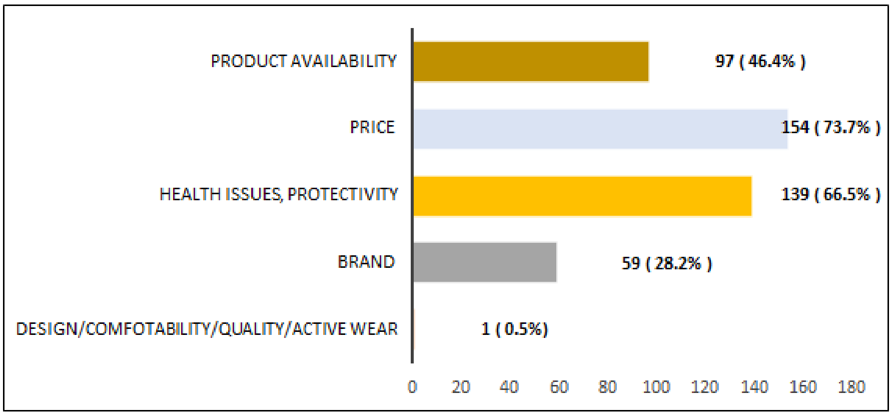

Figure 12. Concerns when buying products from fashion retailers

Figure 12 shows the idea of the consumer on their priorities when buying products from fashion retailers during the COVID-19. 73.7% of consumers will consider the price,66.5% care about the health issues and protectivity. 46.4% consider product availability and the ones who pay attention to the brand are 28.2%.

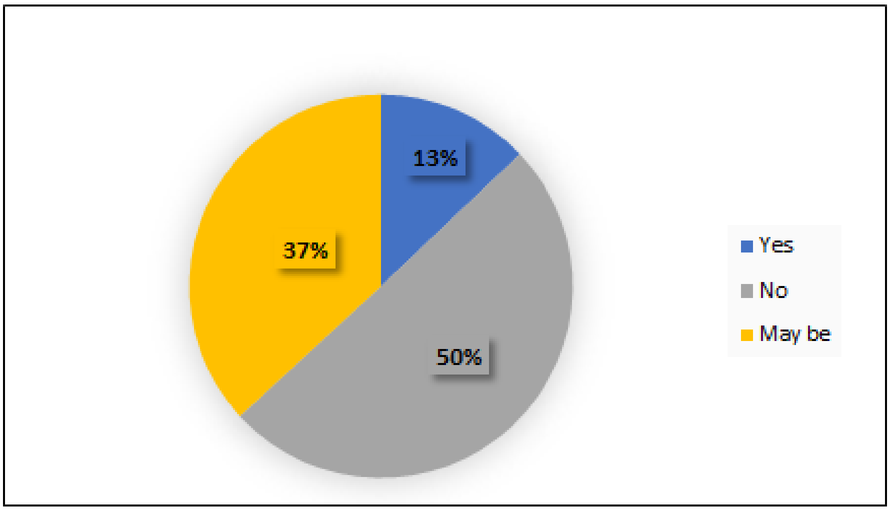

Figure 13. Changing of expenses on branded clothing

Figure 13 demonstrates that 50.2% of the total respondents will not reduce or completely cut their expenses on branded clothing when the country comes back to normal, 36.8% may reduce expenses and only 12.9% will reduce or completely cut expenses on branded clothing after the crisis.

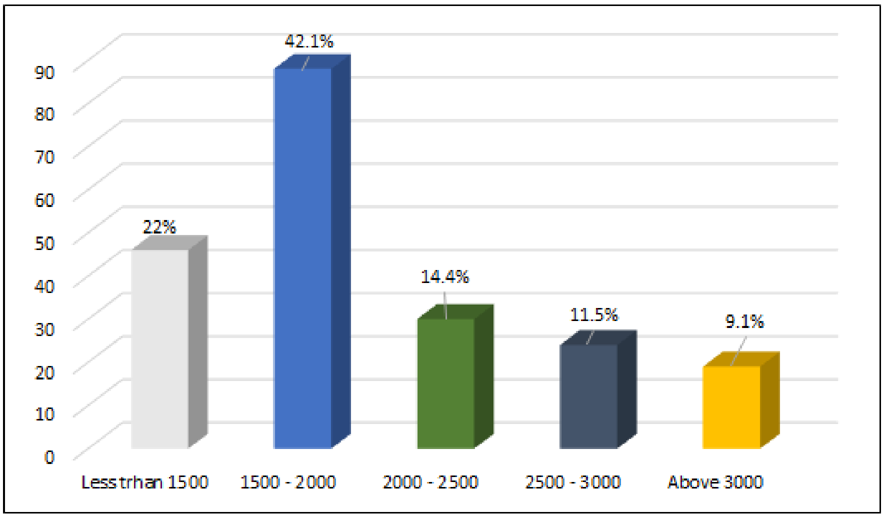

Figure 14. Average amount spend for one-piece garment

Figure 14 specifies that most consumers spend rupees 1500-2000 for one piece of a garment when purchasing from fashion retailers and it is 42.1% out of the total no. of respondents. There were 22% who spend less than Rs.1500 and 14.4% spend Rs. 2000-2500 per piece. 11.5% buy garments of Rs.2500-3000. Only 9.1% will buy pieces above Rs.3000/= and few have responded for above all ranges.

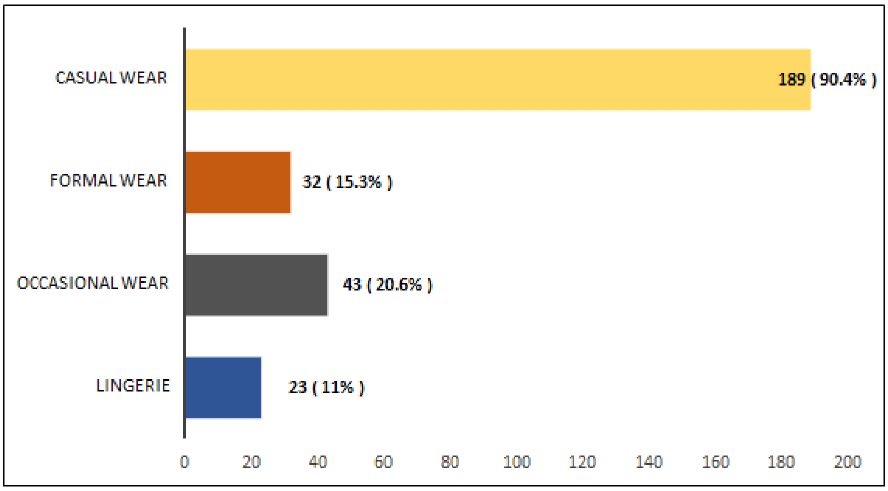

Figure 15. Most purchased type of garments considering the post COVID situation

Figure 15 considers the post-COVID situation, 90.4% will purchase casual wear the most, 20.6% will buy formal wear/office wear. 15.3% of consumers will purchase occasional wear in the post-pandemic period. Decreasement of purchasing casual wear is visible from the above data with the limitations of social gatherings after lockdown.

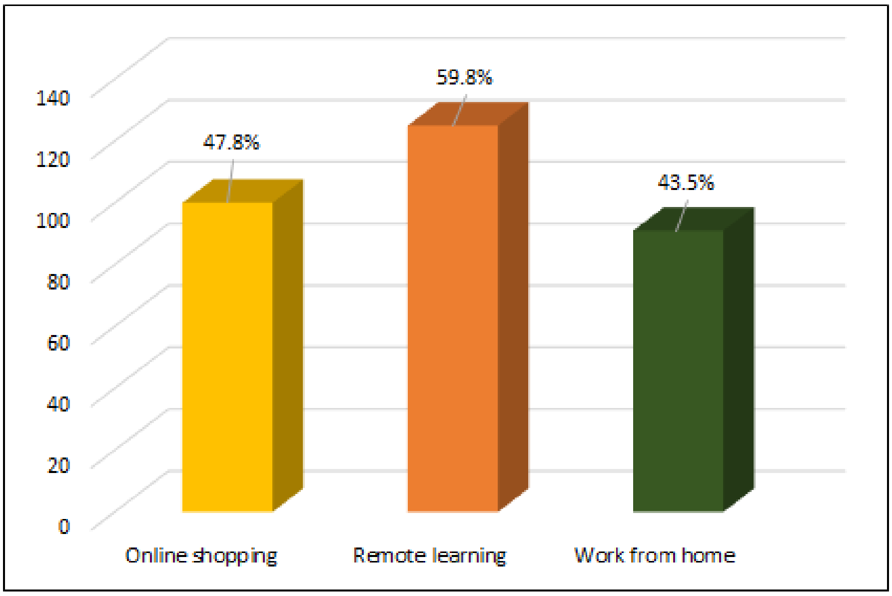

Figure 16. Activities which will continue digitally after COVID crisis

Figure 16 shows the activities which will continue doing digitally after the crisis. In the survey, the priorities of the consumer when shopping after COVID 19 situation and their concerns were added to get the opinion of the majority.

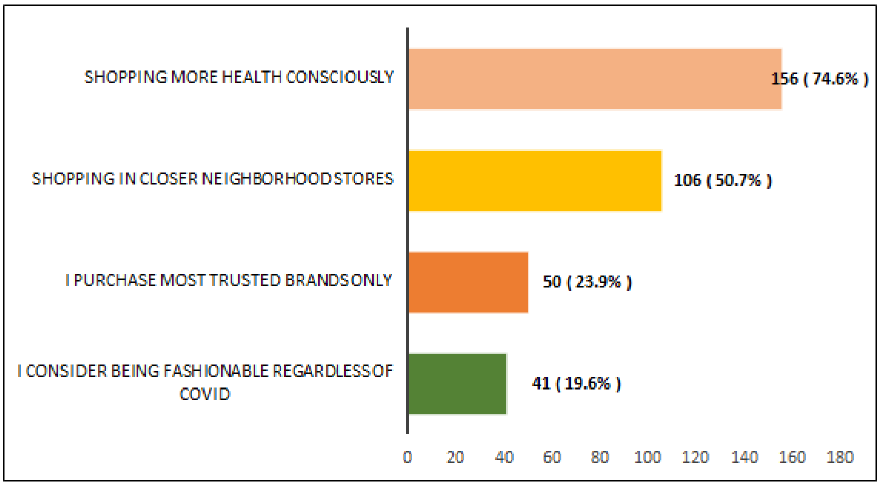

Figure 17. Priorities when shopping after COVID

Figure 17 depicts the priorities of the consumers when shopping after the pandemic and the majority gave priority for shopping more health-conscious, 19.6% have answered as they consider being fashionable regardless of COVID situation.

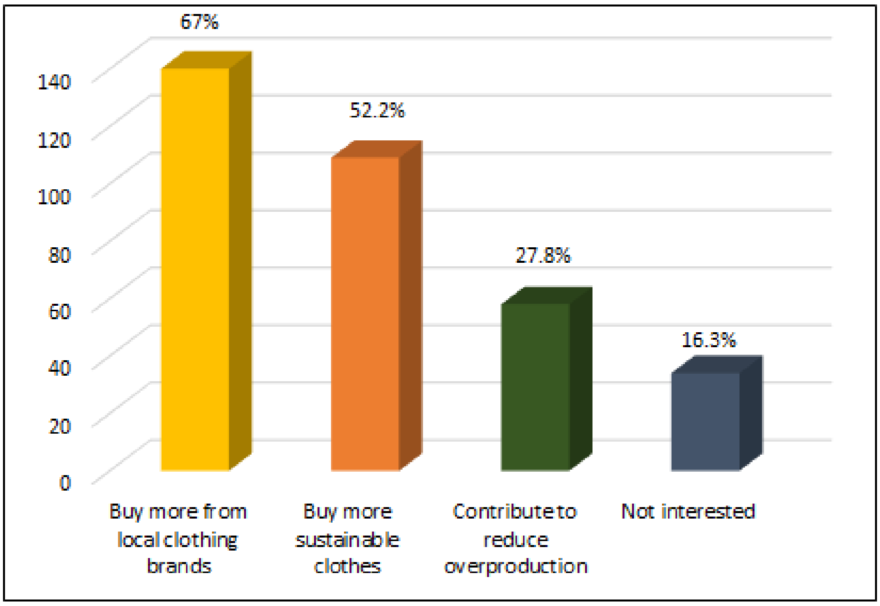

Figure 18. Factors that will be considered when buying products in future

Figure 18 shows that consumers show an interest in buying from local brands as well as sustainable lifestyles. The majority of 67% would buy from local brands after COVID and will contribute to reducing overproduction. Methods of shopping that consumers would prefer most in the future after facing a situation like the COVID pandemic were highlighted.

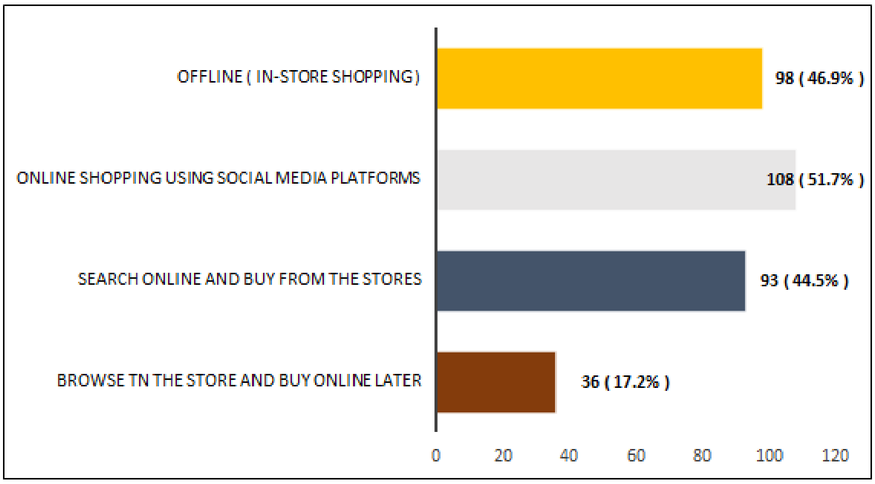

Figure 19. Factors that will be considered when buying products in future

Figure 19 indicates consumer shopping methods. Consumers have prioritized online shopping using social media platforms and it is about 51.7%. 46.9% of consumers will go for offline-in store shopping while 44.5% have prioritized searching online and buying from the stores.

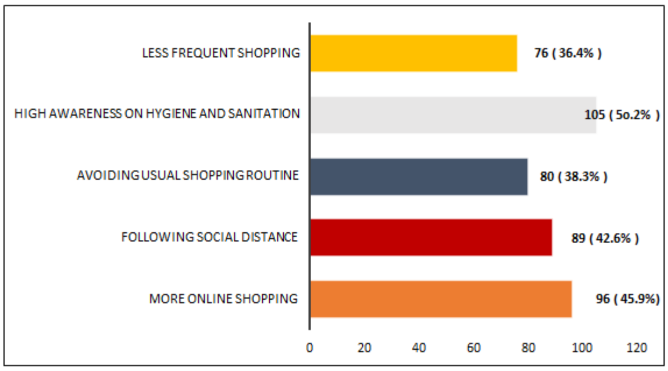

Figure 20. Future shopping experience

Figure 20 is showcasing consumers' opinions about the future shopping experience. This reveals that 50.2% of consumers will be aware of hygiene and sanitation in the future and 36.4% will go for less frequent shopping, 38.3% may avoid the usual shopping routine and 45.9% responded that they will do more online shopping after the crisis.

Discussion

The study strongly suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic affects fashion retailing and consumer lifestyle. The effect on the Sri Lankan fashion industry, the uncertainty it causes, and how it has changed the spending habits of the consumers in the past few months towards digitally-driven lives and online shopping becoming popular leads to a future which is never experienced before. The results showed how respondents react, change of expenses on branded clothing, their concerns when buying products from fashion retailers, and the average amount spent for one-piece of a garment. It also indicated some facts about most purchased types of garments, activities that will continue digitally, and priorities of the consumer when shopping after COVID-19. These findings have important practical implications and factors such as popular methods of shopping after the COVID pandemic, (Online shopping using social media platforms and Apps) will be useful. Respondents point out that the pandemic is changing the path of fashion retailing in Sri Lanka.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Attraction towards online purchasing drastically increased with the closing of non-essential retailer doors which includes fashion during the lockdown. The future of the fashion business will be different from before regarding personal consumption and the post-COVID situation has created a demand for local brands as well as sustainable brands which will not fade after the crisis. Spending habits of the people have drastically changed but will not completely cut or reduce their expenses on clothes. The shift to online consumption was more pronounced among youngsters. The Sri Lankan fashion retailer brands have given priority to social distancing as well as safety measures implemented by the government and will continue these new practices.

Changes of the consumer behavior and new trends were observed. An analysis of the records collected from this study showed that 51.7% of the consumers will continue purchasing online. After the lockdown is lifted and the pandemic is fading retailers should have plans on their future strategies. COVID-19 pandemic would roll out a drastic improvement in how they should implement web-based shopping experiences with user-friendly websites and social media pages in such a way to avoid delayed delivery of products and maintain hygiene factor, in essence, to encourage consumers to order online.

The study was based in Kandy city and the consumer behavior and the impact on fashion retailers were clarified according to the data gathered only in this area which belongs to the central province and the situation in other provinces may vary. Sri Lanka as a country successfully faced the pandemic from March 2020 and the study will be more effective if carried out as a whole covering all the provinces (7 provinces) considering the diversity of behavioral patterns of consumers and the development in the retail sector of other districts as well.

Advertisers should make proper arrangements about how to modify advertisement strategies by focusing on physical or social distancing, cleaning hands with hand wash and keeping up with cleanliness with liquor-based sanitizer. COVID-19 pandemic would roll out a drastic improvement in how consumers perceive a specific brand and advertising content as currently they are keen to the social awareness theme. Retailers should take actions to promote customers about acknowledgment of more online transactions. They should implement web-based shopping experiences with user-friendly web sites and social media pages in such a way to avoid delayed delivery of products and maintain hygiene factor in essence to encourage consumers to order online.

Marketers and retailers should keep the price of their products and services reasonable and affordable in future days. Otherwise, the poor section of our society will survive a lot and the rich will acquire more and more and try to stock for the future. The focus and importance should also be given by the marketers on proper and timely online delivery services. Therefore, the generation of revenue is a matter of challenge in the pandemic situation, but hopefully the situation will change and improve after the lockdown is lifted and retailers should have plans on their future strategies.

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