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DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE POST-PANDEMIC SCENARIO: CONSUMER BEHAVIOR SHIFTS AND THE STRATEGIC ADAPTATION OF FIRMS

MARKETING DIGITAL NO CENÁRIO PÓS-PANDEMIA: MUDANÇAS NO COMPORTAMENTO DO CONSUMIDOR E A ADAPTAÇÃO ESTRATÉGICA DAS EMPRESAS

EL MARKETING DIGITAL EN EL ESCENARIO POSPANDEMIA: CAMBIOS EN EL COMPORTAMIENTO DEL CONSUMIDOR Y ADAPTACIÓN ESTRATÉGICA DE LAS EMPRESAS

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Tais Fraile[1], Thiago Anderson Lira Clemente[2]

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a transition that was already under way in marketing: the migration of consumer attention, search and purchase activity to digital channels. This narrative review examines how consumer behavior changed in the new scenario and how firms can adapt their marketing strategies to remain competitive and sustain sales. Peer-reviewed studies and reference works published up to 2023 were analyzed qualitatively and organized into three dimensions: changes in consumer behavior, the reconfiguration of the customer journey across channels, and the organizational capabilities required for adaptation. The literature indicates that many habits formed during the pandemic—such as online purchasing, contactless service and reliance on digital information sources—have persisted, while consumers now expect seamless experiences across physical and digital touchpoints. Firms that responded effectively combined omnichannel integration, data-driven customer understanding, agile business-model adjustments and a stronger focus on customer experience. Conversely, approaches that treat digital marketing as an isolated communication tool, rather than as part of a broader business transformation, tend to yield limited results. The review concludes that adaptation to the new scenario is less a matter of adopting specific platforms than of building the capabilities needed to understand customers, integrate channels and continuously test and refine marketing actions.

Keywords: Digital Marketing. Consumer Behavior. COVID-19. Omnichannel. Customer Journey. Customer Experience. Business Model Adaptation. Sales Performance.

[1] Member IEEE. E-mail: taisfraile.tf@gmail.com
[2] MBA in Marketing. Escola Brasileira de Administração Pública e de Empresas, Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV EBAPE). Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil; B.A. in Social Communication, Universidade Anhembi Morumbi. São Paulo, SP, Brazil; Member IEEE.

RESUMO
A pandemia de COVID-19 acelerou uma transição que já estava em curso no marketing: a migração da atenção do consumidor e das atividades de busca e compra para canais digitais. Esta revisão narrativa examina como o comportamento do consumidor mudou no novo cenário e como as empresas podem adaptar suas estratégias de marketing para permanecerem competitivas e sustentarem as vendas. Estudos revisados por pares e obras de referência publicados até 2023 foram analisados qualitativamente e organizados em três dimensões: mudanças no comportamento do consumidor, a reconfiguração da jornada do cliente entre canais e as capacidades organizacionais necessárias para a adaptação. A literatura indica que muitos hábitos formados durante a pandemia — como compras online, atendimento sem contato físico e dependência de fontes de informação digitais — persistiram, ao passo que os consumidores agora esperam experiências fluidas entre pontos de contato físicos e digitais. As empresas que responderam de forma eficaz combinaram integração omnichannel, compreensão do cliente baseada em dados, ajustes ágeis no modelo de negócios e um foco maior na experiência do cliente. Por outro lado, abordagens que tratam o marketing digital como uma ferramenta de comunicação isolada, em vez de parte de uma transformação empresarial mais ampla, tendem a gerar resultados limitados. A revisão conclui que a adaptação ao novo cenário é menos uma questão de adotar plataformas específicas do que de construir as capacidades necessárias para compreender os clientes, integrar canais e testar e refinar continuamente as ações de marketing.

Palavras-chave: Marketing Digital. Comportamento do Consumidor. COVID-19. Omnichannel. Jornada do Cliente. Experiência do Cliente. Adaptação do Modelo de Negócios. Desempenho de Vendas.

RESUMEN
La pandemia de COVID-19 aceleró una transición que ya estaba en marcha en el ámbito del marketing: la migración de la atención del consumidor y de las actividades de búsqueda y compra hacia los canales digitales. Esta revisión narrativa examina cómo cambió el comportamiento del consumidor en el nuevo escenario y cómo las empresas pueden adaptar sus estrategias de marketing para mantener la competitividad y sostener las ventas. Se analizaron cualitativamente estudios revisados por pares y obras de referencia publicados hasta 2023, organizando la información en tres dimensiones: cambios en el comportamiento del consumidor, la reconfiguración del recorrido del cliente a través de los canales y las capacidades organizativas necesarias para la adaptación. La literatura indica que muchos hábitos adquiridos durante la pandemia —como la compra en línea, el servicio sin contacto y la dependencia de fuentes de información digitales— han perdurado, al tiempo que los consumidores esperan ahora experiencias fluidas entre los puntos de contacto físicos y digitales. Las empresas que respondieron eficazmente combinaron la integración omnicanal, una comprensión del cliente basada en datos, ajustes ágiles en el modelo de negocio y un mayor enfoque en la experiencia del cliente. Por el contrario, los enfoques que tratan el marketing digital como una herramienta de comunicación aislada, en lugar de como parte de una transformación empresarial más amplia, tienden a arrojar resultados limitados. La revisión concluye que la adaptación al nuevo escenario no depende tanto de adoptar plataformas específicas como de desarrollar las capacidades necesarias para comprender a

los clientes, integrar canales y probar y perfeccionar continuamente las acciones de marketing.

Palabras clave: Marketing Digital. Comportamiento del Consumidor. COVID-19. Omnicanalidad. Recorrido del Cliente. Experiencia del Cliente. Adaptación del Modelo de Negocio. Desempeño de Ventas.

1 INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have been reshaping marketing for more than two decades, altering how consumers search for information, evaluate alternatives, purchase and share their experiences [1, 2]. Digital marketing is now understood not merely as advertising on online media, but as an adaptive, technology-enabled process through which firms collaborate with customers and partners to create, communicate, deliver and sustain value [3]. This broader view places digital marketing at the center of firms' commercial strategy.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, acted as an abrupt accelerator of this transition. Mobility restrictions, the temporary closure of physical stores and health concerns pushed consumers and companies toward digital channels in a matter of weeks [4, 5]. Businesses of all sizes were forced to reconsider their value propositions, channels and customer relationships in order to survive [6, 7]. For many organizations, the pandemic exposed the gap between the digital expectations of customers and the digital capabilities of the firm.

As restrictions eased, a central question emerged for managers: which changes were temporary and which represent a lasting new scenario? Understanding this distinction is essential for deciding where to invest and how to reorganize marketing activities. The present study therefore examines how consumer behavior changed in the post-pandemic scenario and identifies the strategic adaptations that allow firms to remain competitive and to sustain sales growth.

1.1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Two complementary perspectives frame the analysis. The first concerns consumer behavior. Habits are formed and maintained by context; when the context changes, habits are disrupted, and new behaviors may emerge or old ones may return once conditions normalize [4]. Consumption patterns observed during the pandemic—hoarding, improvisation, pent-up demand, the embrace of digital technology and the store coming home—illustrate how quickly behavior can adapt when constraints change [4].

The second perspective concerns the customer journey. Customer experience is formed across multiple touchpoints during the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages, and many of these touchpoints are not directly controlled by the firm [8]. The evolution

from multichannel to omnichannel retailing reflects the need to manage these touchpoints in an integrated way, so that customers can move freely between channels during a single journey [9]. In this context, the shift from traditional to digital marketing is described as a combination of online and offline interactions rather than a substitution of one by the other [10].

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 REVIEW DESIGN AND SOURCE SELECTION

This study adopts a narrative literature-review approach. Peer-reviewed articles and reference books in marketing, consumer behavior and business strategy published up to 2023 were selected for their relevance to three questions: how consumer behavior changed during and after the pandemic; how the customer journey and channel structure were reconfigured; and which organizational capabilities support adaptation. Priority was given to frequently cited conceptual frameworks, systematic research agendas and empirical studies published in established marketing and management journals.

2.2 ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The selected sources were analyzed qualitatively and organized by theme. Because the studies differ in context, sector, method and country, their findings were not combined into a quantitative estimate. Instead, convergent conclusions were identified and distinguished from those that depend on specific sectors or conditions. The review does not generate new empirical data; its contribution lies in organizing existing evidence into a structure that managers can use to guide adaptation. No ethical approval was required, as the study relies exclusively on published sources.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 PERSISTENT CHANGES IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The literature indicates that the pandemic did not create digital consumption but compressed into months a shift that would otherwise have taken years. Consumers who had never purchased online were compelled to do so, learned the process and, in many cases, kept the habit once the convenience of digital channels became evident [4, 5]. Activities that

were previously performed outside the home, such as shopping, education, work and entertainment, were partially brought into the home, increasing the time consumers spend in digital environments [4].

At the same time, not every behavior changed permanently. Sheth argues that some habits return once constraints disappear, while others are replaced by new habits that prove more convenient, affordable or accessible [4]. For firms, the practical implication is that the post-pandemic consumer is hybrid: they value physical experiences but expect digital convenience at every stage, including information search, price comparison, payment, delivery and after-sales support [5, 11].

Social media also consolidated its role as a space for discovery, evaluation and recommendation. Consumers increasingly rely on peer reviews, creators and online communities when forming opinions about brands, which shifts part of the persuasive power from the firm to the network of consumers [12, 13]. This change requires firms to listen, respond and participate in conversations rather than simply broadcast messages.

3.2 RECONFIGURATION OF THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

The customer journey in the new scenario is non-linear and distributed across numerous touchpoints. A customer may discover a product on social media, research it on a search engine, compare prices on a marketplace, visit a physical store and complete the purchase through a mobile application [8, 9]. Each of these touchpoints contributes to the overall experience and to the decision to buy.

Omnichannel management addresses this complexity by integrating channels so that information, inventory, prices and service are consistent wherever the customer interacts with the firm [9]. Technologies such as mobile applications, contactless payment, click-and-collect services and real-time inventory visibility have become part of customers' expectations [11, 14]. Firms that maintained separate, uncoordinated channels during the pandemic experienced friction—for example, products advertised online that were unavailable in store—which undermined customer trust.

3.3 STRATEGIC RESPONSES OF FIRMS

Studies of business-model adaptation during the pandemic show that firms responded along different paths. Some focused on preserving their existing business model, others adjusted specific components such as channels or revenue streams, and some redesigned the model more deeply [6]. Among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), digital transformation often followed a staged path, beginning with the use of digital channels for sales and communication and progressing toward broader digitalization of processes [15]. Family firms, in turn, frequently combined short-term cost containment with an accelerated adoption of digital tools [7].

Across these studies, the firms that adapted most effectively shared several characteristics, summarized in Table 1. They used data to understand changes in demand, integrated channels around the customer, adapted their offerings to new needs and adopted an agile approach based on rapid experimentation [6, 16]. These responses are consistent with the broader view that digital transformation involves changes in strategy, organizational structure and capabilities, not only the adoption of technology [16].

Table 1

Changes in the Post-Pandemic Scenario and Corresponding Strategic Adaptations

Change in the scenario	Evidence from the literature	Strategic adaptation for firms
Consolidation of online purchasing habits	Consumers who adopted digital channels during restrictions maintained part of these habits [4, 5].	Strengthen e-commerce, mobile channels and digital customer service as permanent sales channels.
Non-linear, multi-touchpoint journeys	Experience is formed across touchpoints in all stages of the journey [8].	Map the customer journey and remove friction between stages and channels.
Demand for channel integration	Customers expect consistency between physical and digital channels [9, 11].	Adopt omnichannel management of prices, inventory, communication and service.
Greater influence of social networks	Peers, creators and communities influence evaluation and choice [12, 13].	Monitor conversations, engage with communities and develop relevant content.
Uncertainty and rapid change	Firms adjusted business-model components at different depths [6, 15].	Adopt agile planning, rapid testing and continuous measurement of results.

Source: prepared by the author from the cited literature.

3.4 ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITIES FOR ADAPTATION

The literature converges on the idea that technology alone does not produce results. Digital transformation requires digital resources, but also organizational structures, skills and decision processes that allow the firm to use them effectively [16]. In marketing, this includes the ability to collect and analyze customer data, coordinate teams across channels and translate insights into action [1, 17].

Leeflang and colleagues identified, even before the pandemic, a talent gap in analytical capabilities and the difficulty of measuring the effectiveness of digital actions as major challenges for marketing in the digital era [1]. The pandemic made these challenges more urgent. Firms that had invested in analytical capabilities could detect changes in demand quickly and redirect investments, whereas those that depended on intuition and fixed annual plans struggled to respond [5, 17].

3.5 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SALES GROWTH

For managers, the findings suggest a sequence of practical steps. First, the firm should understand its customers' current journey, identifying which channels they use at each stage and where friction occurs [8]. Second, it should integrate channels so that the customer experiences a single brand, regardless of the touchpoint [9]. Third, it should strengthen its digital presence in the spaces where customers search and interact, including search engines, social networks and marketplaces [3, 12]. Fourth, it should establish indicators that link marketing actions to commercial outcomes, allowing continuous adjustment [17].

These steps are accessible to firms of different sizes. For SMEs, the priority is usually to establish basic digital sales and service channels and to use simple customer data consistently, before advancing to more sophisticated tools [15]. The literature also cautions that the adaptation must preserve the human dimension of the relationship: technology should facilitate, not replace, trust and empathy in customer interactions [14, 18].

3.6 LIMITATIONS

The studies reviewed cover different sectors, countries and stages of the pandemic, and many were published while the situation was still evolving. Consequently, the persistence of specific behaviors may vary by market and product category. The conclusions should

therefore be interpreted as general strategic orientations rather than precise forecasts for any particular industry.

4 CONCLUSION

The post-pandemic scenario is characterized by a hybrid consumer who combines physical and digital channels, relies heavily on online information and peer opinions, and expects consistent, convenient experiences throughout the customer journey. The pandemic accelerated these trends, and a significant part of the habits formed during that period has persisted.

Firms that wish to sustain and increase sales in this environment need to treat digital marketing as part of a broader business transformation. Integrating channels, understanding the customer journey, building analytical capabilities and adopting agile, test-and-learn approaches are more decisive than adopting any single platform. Future research should examine, with longitudinal data, which post-pandemic behaviors remain stable in different sectors and how SMEs can develop digital marketing capabilities with limited resources.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SMEs — Small and medium-sized enterprises

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