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***Impact of COVID-19 on
consumer buying behavior
toward online shopping in
Iraq***

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Abstract

*With the increasing penetration of the internet, online shopping has become ubiquitous with payments and deliveries made easy. Moreover, owing to COVID-19, online shopping has become even more attractive, considering the restricted circumstances. This study investigates the possible correlation of COVID-19 to consumer buying behaviors of electronic durable goods in Iraq with a specific focus on understanding consumer adaptations to the related restrictions. This study examines extant literature and secondary sales data from Samsung, the largest consumer electronic durable-goods company in Iraq, to show how the pandemic may have encouraged Iraqi consumers to embrace technology, as hinted by the surge in online purchases. Some markets have found it difficult to adapt to online shopping, despite the pandemic negatively affecting brick-and-mortar sales worldwide. However, many are adapting via innovation and investment. Overall, COVID-19 may have caused Iraqi consumers to embrace technology and adapt their lifestyles to the restricted circumstances. **Keywords:** Consumer electronics, Consumer purchasing, Consumption, Coronavirus, Durable goods, E-commerce*

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Introduction

Online shopping has revolutionized the marketing strategies of many sellers in recent decades as consumers have grown accustomed to online purchasing and the door-step-delivery of products from anywhere in the world (Bucko, Lukáš and Martina 2018; Mohammad et al. 2018). With the eruption of COVID-19, this shift in buyer behavior has greatly accelerated, prompting businesses to reach even their most loyal brick-and-mortar consumers in the digital space. This massive challenge is unprecedented and has forced organizations to formulate novel solutions to adapt to the new normal (Carnevale and Hatak 2020). Restrictive lockdown rules and social-distancing practices have severely disrupted consumer behavior worldwide (Sheth 2020a). As a result, various types of businesses have been forced to find new ways to reach homebound consumers and to re-penetrate their markets. As consumers embrace new digital technologies in their sequestered lifestyles, their daily routines and habits are transforming the space of online shopping (Bucko, Lukáš and Martina 2018). In Iraq, companies have found it difficult to invest in the online-shopping space, because, within its economy, Iraq has not succeeded in creating the large healthy companies that can support the vast changes. Furthermore, Iraqi consumers have been hesitant to invest. Many factors have contributed to this lack of consumer confidence, including political instability, economic uncertainty, and a lack of transparency (Ali 2016). According to Al-Najjar and Jawad (2016), e-commerce adoption in Iraq has faced many obstacles, such as e-payment problems, lack of trust, the fragility of government regulations, the unreliability of telecommunications, the limited availability of technology, and socio-cultural barriers. Apart from these obstacles, given the appropriate infrastructure, e-commerce could increase in Iraq. Jaffar Mazen and Karzan (2016) further examined the challenges of implementing e-commerce in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, identifying several issues obstructing sector growth, including a lack of infrastructure, the difficulty of using the Kurdish language in these systems, deficiencies in online banking, instability of the political system, and the lack of compatibility of these systems with the religious views of consumers.

Consequently, the use of credit cards in Iraq is minimal, with consumers mostly relying on cash for their daily transactions. According to Ahmed (2020), banks and other financial institutions have not been able to provide the services required for issuing credit cards; the institutions lack the proper infrastructure. Regardless, consumers in Iraq's Kurdistan region have shown favorable inclinations toward the use of credit cards. However, their attitudes toward online payment systems have not grown enough to meet the preconditions of online shopping. Demir and Fakhir (2017) argued that, although online banking is nonexistent in Iraq's Kurdistan region, individuals under 35 years old remain enthusiastic about these services, as opposed to the older generations. Furthermore, a study by Salman and Sahi (2017) examined Iraqi buyer behavior toward e-shopping and observed an increase in demand,

especially among youth between ages 20 and 25. They discovered that, owing to the Iraqi economic structure, most people were not accustomed to shopping online. Another obstacle is the lack credit-card availability. The authors added that, apart from these obstructions, Iraqi youth remain open to the concept and openly seek the time-saving, convenient, and user-friendly services provided by online shopping. Interestingly, Zaboon, Ganawi and Dakhil (2018) showed that the e-commerce industry was growing rapidly in Iraq and had already become an important driver of sustainable economic development in the country. The authors claimed that this phenomenon had already begun generating jobs and was increasingly influencing extant supply chains.

The purpose of this research is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Iraqi consumer purchasing behavior of electronic durable goods. Apart from the optimism of Zaboon, Ganawi and Dakhil (2018) research has shown that most Iraqis still do not purchase online and are currently not motivated to adapt (Salman and Sahi 2017; Ahmed 2020). Thus, the opportunity is ripe to compare the behaviors of consumers of electronic durable goods before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In this fashion, this study will determine whether or not Iraqi consumers still prefer brick-and-mortar over online shopping. Furthermore, this study seeks to ascertain if and what new trends or habits are emerging in response to the pandemic.

Several studies (e.g., Ahmed (2020), Ali (2016), Demir and Fakhir (2017), Jaffar Mazen and Karzan (2016), Salman and Sahi (2017), and Zaboon, Ganawi and Dakhil (2018)) have examined various facets of Iraqi online-shopping habits. However, none have investigated the impact of COVID-19 on changes in consumer purchasing behavior vis-à-vis online shopping in the consumer electronic durable goods market in Iraq. This paper helps fill this gap with its contribution to the literature.

The paper continues as follows. Section 2 provides a review of the previous literature. Section 3 discusses the methodology used to obtain the research data. Section 4 describes the data and presents the results. Section 5 discusses the implications of the results, and Section 6 provides conclusions, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Organizations face uncertainty and challenges every day worldwide (Eisenhardt Melissa and Scott 2016; Ferraro et al. 2015). The related uncertainties and risks, in turn, directly affect economies (Jarus 2020). The consequences of COVID-19 have been unprecedented, defying the most predictable scenarios (Carlsson-Szlezak Martin and Paul . 2020). Stanciu and Str (2015) noted that thousands of epidemics (e.g., smallpox, Spanish flu, the bubonic plague, severe acute respiratory syndrome, human immunodeficiency viruses,

and Ebola) have occurred over the course of human history. In all cases, these outbreaks had direct negative impacts on businesses and economies.

COVID-19 has already caused widespread damage to the global economy, with some countries shutting down their stock markets, closing corporate offices, retiring small businesses, and canceling major social events. The additional effects of reduced consumption and investment have impacted many other areas dependent upon healthy economies (Ozili and Arun 2020). The pandemic has negatively affected consumption across several market categories in China (Chen Wenlan and Qiang 2020). In Great Britain, economic spending has been largely redirected toward necessities, such as groceries (Chronopoulos, Marcel and John 2020). In Denmark, product and service market consumption has dropped 27% (Andersen et al. 2020) with economic spending being largely redirected toward personal protective equipment (Addo et al. 2020). In Romania, people have changed their daily activities and economic habits, forcing companies to adapt and reassess their strategies. In return, online shopping has grown substantially with consumers exercising caution while sequestering at home. These changes have caused even the staunchest anti-online consumption advocates to change their tune and adapt (Stanciu et al. 2020). Notably, restaurants and retail outlets have suffered the most (Baker et al. 2020). Luxury and high-end retailers are also suffering, leading to narrower selections of value-oriented brands and specials (Roggeveen and Sethuraman 2020). On the other hand, several versatile brands have adapted quickly and are showing new signs of growth during this time (Knowles et al. 2020).

Various socioeconomic implications of the pandemic have been noted in the food sector (Nicola et al. 2020) as a result of disruptions of the food-supply chain in many parts of the world, triggering panic buying. Labor shortages and health risks are also key consequences (Hobbs 2020). In Canada, the pandemic has not greatly hindered the supply of food products; but the supply source has shifted from food services to retail channels (Richards and Rickard 2020). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, consumers have increased their risk-mitigation activities in regards to food sources, exercising particular care when selecting foods imported from China (Widayat and Arifin 2020). Consumers in India have become very cautious about restaurants, preferring to obtain food essentials through online purchasing (Rao and Moorthy 2020).

Some factors (e.g., location and time) are tied to consumption. With consumer behaviors, habits play a role in what, when, and where people consume (Sheth 2020b). Not only have consumption patterns changed during the pandemic, sales-force activities have changed as well (Hartmann and Lussier 2020). The pandemic has accelerated notable structural changes worldwide, especially those of digital transformations of businesses (Kim 2020). Unfortunately, the virus is a very personal threat and has spread among employees in all of the companies that were already affected by the changes of consumer habits (Elrhim and

Elsayed 2020). This double threat has forced various supply chains to implement strict preventative measures, negatively affecting Chinese manufacturers in particular (Hasanat et al. 2020).

Nguyen et al. (2020) found that, in Vietnam, consumer demand for books has shifted toward online shopping. A study in France investigated consumer expenditure mobility and online–offline substitution responses during the pandemic by analyzing billions of credit-card transactions, finding that the online-shopping option softened the harshest effects of the pandemic on consumption expenditures while reflecting the resilience of a strong economy (Bounie, Youssouf and John, 2020).

More related to this work, scholars have investigated the behaviors of consumers toward the purchase of electronic durable goods online. Kumar and Kaushal (2019) identified the main factors affecting consumer attitudes and behaviors toward the purchase of electronic durable goods. They found that five main factors affected consumer attitudes and behaviors: perceived quality, price consciousness, brand consciousness, perceived risk, and advertisement. Meanwhile, Kulshreshtha Naval and Vikas (2017) examined whether consumer preferences toward electronic durable goods were impacted by brand equity, price, advertisement, celebrity endorsement, or country of origin. Bag, Manoj and Felix (2019), who studied the integrated end-to-end visibility and communications potential related to the “Retail 4.0” construct, found that demand existed for accurate predictions of consumer purchase intentions. They further developed a prediction model to anticipate consumer purchase intentions toward durable goods. Luo, Wang and Zhang (2019) noted that China had become the largest e-commerce market in the world and examined how China’s household consumption growth was shaped by e-commerce factors. They found an association between consumption growth and e-commerce development, and they suggested that e-commerce activities particularly contributed to the reduction of consumption inequalities. Moreover, they found that the consumption of durable and in-style goods exhibited greater growth, compared with that of local services.

Sullivan and Kim (2018) maintained that product evaluation was an important factor in online repurchasing intentions and that the value perceived by consumers was influenced by perceived quality, perceived competitive price, and website reputation. This, in turn, influenced overall online trust. The authors concluded that the main predictors of online repurchase intentions were online trust and perceived value. Soopramanien (2011) studied the development of consumer attitudes toward online shopping and examined the concept of online-shopping skepticism, which reflects people’s fear of online-shopping risks, even when they realize the benefits. The author showed that consumer perceptions of risk decreased as they gained experience and knowledge. Moran (2020) argued that consumer approaches to

shopping for products and services changed when they used online commerce, because online firms have more control over the consumer shopping experience, including unprecedented access to buyer data and demographics. After thorough examination, the study concluded that, compared with offline spending, consumers did not believe that online firms would use manipulative tactics and deceptive practices to increase online shopping.

In summary, apart from the valuable knowledge gained from these studies, none of them investigated the impact of COVID-19 on consumer buying behaviors in relation to electronic goods. The current study is motivated by the need to understand the effects of COVID-19 on economies, businesses, and consumers, given its magnitude. Moreover, hardly any studies have examined general consumer behaviors in response to the pandemic while focusing Iraqi consumers and the Iraqi market in general. This research helps to fill this gap by providing insights for academics and guidance for business professionals affected by the Iraqi markets. This research is significant, because it enhances the understanding of Iraqi consumer behavior toward online shopping in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings will help businesses decide whether to further invest in e-commerce platforms or to continue offering products in conventional brick-and-mortar methods.

Methodology

The study began with a literature review, citing sources from credible journal articles, books, and other content relevant to the research problem (see bibliography). Secondary sales data from Samsung Electronics in Iraq. The data were provided by the official Samsung distributor in Iraq (i.e., Bayad Group), reflecting their sales for the first halves of 2019 and 2020. Data were analyzed, and graphs were interpreted to understand the disparity between physical and online shopping venues. A comparison was then made to determine consumer behavior patterns in Iraq before and after COVID-19.

Results

A comparison of sales data within the given dates is shown in Figure 1. January sales grew by 84%. Then, as COVID-19 cases appeared in Iraq in February, 2020, sales dropped by -2%, compared with February. This drop continued in March, when sales dropped by -58%, compared with the prior year. Compared with April, 2019, April, 2020 sales dropped by -51%. In May, 2020, as the restrictions eased, sales compared with May, 2019 decreased by only -33%. However, in June, 2020, sales dropped by -47% compared with 2019. In total, the sales during the first half of 2020 compared with those of 2019 exhibited an aggregate drop of -24%.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Title Impact of COVID-19 on consumer buying behavior toward online shopping in Iraq.

Sales data from the first half of 2019 show a segmentation of consumer electronics product-sale shares vs. total sales as follows: air-conditioners, 13.3%; dishwashers, 3.9%; microwaves, 0.2%; refrigerators, 20%; televisions, 44.4%; vacuum cleaners, 0.4%; and washing machines, 17.8%. Meanwhile, sales data from the first half of 2020 show the segmentation of product-sale shares vs. total sales as follows: air-conditioners, 4.4%; dishwashers, 2.6%; microwaves, 1.8%; refrigerators, 11.1%; televisions, 63.2%; VC 1.4%; and washing machines, 15.3%. Figure 2 illustrates these results.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Comparing sales during the first halves of 2019 and 2020 reveals that air-conditioner sales dropped 65%; dishwasher sales dropped 29%; microwave sales grew 232%; refrigerator sales dropped 41%; televisions sales grew 50%; vacuum cleaner sales grew 313%; and finally, the sales of washing machines dropped 9%. There are two main retail channels for Samsung electronics in Iraq: in-store sales and online sales. The sales data from the first half of 2019 show that in-store sales were 98% of total sales, whereas online sales were only 2%. In contrast, in the first half of 2020, in-store sales were 84% of total sales, whereas online sales were 16%. From this data, it can be observed that in 2020 compared to 2019, in-store sales dropped by -14%, whereas online sales exhibited a sharp increase of 700%. These data are depicted in Figure 3.

Discussion

Iraqi consumers are sensitive about consumer electronics brands. Among durable goods and consumer electronics companies, competition for consumer attention is exceptionally fierce (Ali 2014). The gross market share of Samsung electronics durable goods (e.g., televisions, washing machines, air-conditioners, refrigerators, microwaves, and vacuum cleaners) was 46% of the Iraqi market in 2019, according to a market research report by the SAA research agency (Shaswar 2020). It is significant that this represents almost half of the Iraqi market.

The data showed that, in Iraq, the COVID-19 pandemic corresponded to a decrease of sales of Samsung electronics consumer durable goods, starting in February of 2020, when the virus first appeared in Iraq. It further correlated with a gradual drop in sales compared with the prior year. Total sales during the first half of 2020 dropped by 24%, compared with sales in the first half of 2019. Moreover, consumption shifted toward more essential items, such as food. The quarantine and restrictions on movements may have contributed to this drop. It was noted that the demand for television sets, microwaves, and vacuum cleaners increased in 2020 compared to 2019, whereas the demand for air-conditioners, dishwashers, refrigerators, and washing machines decreased. These results may imply that the statistics corresponded with social distancing, which prompted people to avoid large gatherings and inspired consumers to shop from home. The trends of this study reflect the findings of Bhatti et al. (2020), who

studied e-commerce global trends in the COVID-19 season and found that there was a rise in global online shopping. Similar findings were reported by Pantano et al. (2020), who found that, as retailers sought ways to accommodate the needs of consumers through online shopping, consumers responded positively. Other studies have shown increases in online spending associated with COVID-19 (e.g., Nguyen et al. 2020; Kim 2020; Bounie, Youssouf and John 2020). They tend to agree that there has been a rise in online shopping despite an overall drop in sales. On the other hand, studies have not shown any reduction of online shopping in relation to COVID-19.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is assumed to have affected consumer behavior worldwide, impacting local and global economies. Studies have shown that consumer behavior has changed in response to the pandemic. Thus, many companies are (have) innovating (innovated) to adapt to the new circumstances. Notably, technology has become more influential in the daily lives of consumers and businesses. Studies show that COVID-19 has negatively impacted worldwide economies, disrupting both supply chains and sales channels. The results of this study show that, for the 2 years covered, Iraqi consumers' online-shopping rate increased alongside the rise in global and Iraqi COVID-19 cases. This may point to a correlation, which should be the focus of additional studies, wherein a larger scope might be incorporated into a thorough regression analysis of coherent variables, both in Iraq and worldwide.

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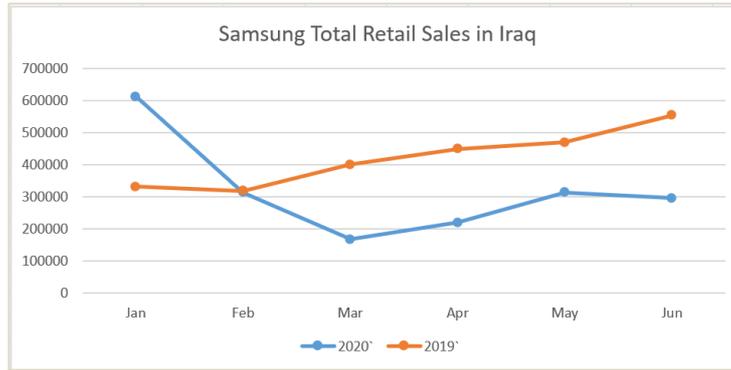


FIGURE 1

First-half Sales Comparison (2019–2020)

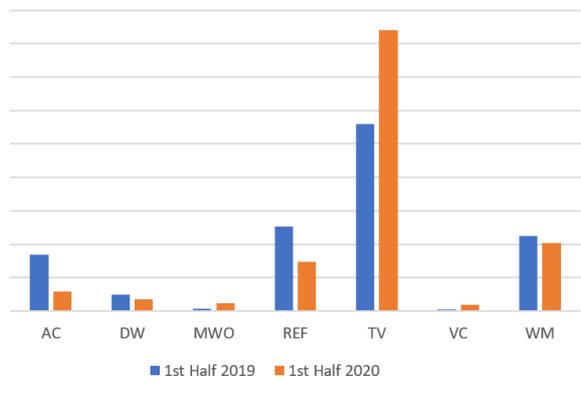


FIGURE 2

First-half Sales per Product (2019–2020)

FIGURE 3

In-store Sales Share vs. Online Sales Share

