CONSUMER BEHAVIOR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this work is to verify how social media were important in the purchase decision process of consumers during social isolation and the COVID-19 pandemic. Using bibliographic research as the main methodology, with a quantitative character. It can be seen that the pandemic accelerated the process in terms of knowledge of people's behavior when consuming products and services. Many resistant consumers until then, bought only through physical stores, but realized that they need to reinvent their shopping models, making them also through online.

Key Word: Consumer Behavior. Social Media. COVID-19.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that the world has been facing a great adversity, certainly never seen in the contemporary period. The new Coronavirus comprises in a highly viral flu that directly affects the human respiratory system, due to its recent emergence there are no defenses.

The danger of this new virus lies in its transmission, it is extremely easy to contract the virus due to its properties, a problem that is added to the limited and insufficient amount of proven information about the new Coronavirus. Seeking to contain this transmission in the short term, the largest governments in the world, as well as the World Health Organization, started to encourage social isolation and voluntary quarantine. As a measure to encourage this practice, local businesses had to be closed, as well as restaurants, cinemas, nightclubs, bars and any and all events where a considerable number of people were concentrated.

This reality caused a major collapse in the economic system of countries, especially in the case of Brazil, which had not yet recovered from the crisis that has plagued it since 2015, with complex political issues involved.

For this reason, it became necessary for organizations to develop new ways of doing marketing, aiming to capture this new consumer behavior. The consolidation of the internet and technological means opens the way for a new type of advertising, one that – literally – propagates in a virtual environment.

However, the context of the pandemic caused major changes in this environment and in all sectors of the world, more precisely with regard to online commerce, which had been growing rapidly and was greatly heated by indications of social isolation to contain the spread of the virus (Aveni, 2020).

Also according to Aveni (2020), in just six months, online sales had an extraordinary growth, but the recommendations of social isolation and restrictions on opening malls and stores will not be eternal. It is necessary that organizations look for ways to keep this sector heated and enable the constant growth of online sales, following the procedural digitalization that the world has been going through.

Understanding consumer behavior is something that all institutions aim to achieve. Such knowledge is important for those who intend to obtain, increase and/or maintain their customers' satisfaction, as well as maximize the organization's profits. For this, it is necessary to monitor the needs and desires of your potential customers. The starting point for knowing and satisfying

the needs and desires of customers is to try to understand consumer behavior and study how people, groups and organizations select, buy, use and discard products or services (Kotler, 2000).

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2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior can be defined according to Rook (2007) as "the activities directly involved in obtaining, consuming and disposing of products and services, including the decision-making processes that precede and follow these actions". With the same thought, Sheth, Mittal and Newman (2001) define consumer behavior as the physical and mental activities performed by consumers of consumer and industrial goods that result in decisions and actions, such as buying and using products and services, as well as pay for them. In summary, the proposed definitions of consumer behavior include various activities and many roles that people can assume.

The study of consumer behavior is the study of how individuals make decisions to spend their available resources (time, money, effort) on consumption-related items (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2000). Such study is disassociated from its object of study, which is why some authors conceive consumer behavior as a study and not as an activity and/or process.

For example, Hawkins (2001) defines consumer behavior as the study of people, groups or organizations and the processes they use to select, obtain, use and dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and the impact that these processes have in consumption and society. In other words, it is the study of purchasing units and exchange processes involved in the acquisition, consumption and disposition of goods, services, experiences and ideas (Mowen and Minor, 2003).

Likewise, Solomon (2011, p. 33) defines consumer behavior as "the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, buy, use or discard products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires". These last definitions address the study of consumer behavior as a tool to understand the needs and desires of potential customers and how they behave when they are inserted in the purchase process.

Based on such definitions, consumer behavior, for the purpose of this study, refers to the mental and behavioral process in which consumers go through before, during and after choosing or not to consume a product or service. Before approaching this process and its characteristics, it is worth analyzing some factors that influence it. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2015, p. 116) "consumer behavior is also influenced by social factors, such as small groups, family, social roles and status", which exert a high degree of influence on people.

Churchill and Peter (2010, p. 160) conceptualize reference groups as being "people who influence the thoughts, feelings and behavior of consumers". People seek to be influenced by agents who have some knowledge in the area. Kotler and Keller (2012), in their literary approach, explain that groups are very important to define an individual's norms of behavior.

All people, in one way or another, participate in a group, including family, organizations, clubs, church, school and friends. For Kotler and Armstrong (2015, p. 116) "the groups that exert direct influence on a person and of which he is a part are called association groups", whereas the reference groups function as direct or indirect reference points and comparison points in shaping consumer behavior. Ribeiro (2015, p. 81) states that "reference groups act as elements of comparison or direct or indirect reference in a person's behavior", and that association groups are directly related to the individual.

The family is the most influential primary reference group in behavioral consumption decisions and constitutes the most important product purchasing organization in the consumer society (Kotler and Keller, 2012).

Throughout their lives, human beings are framed in several distinct groups, exercising different roles and social positions. The individual acquires products that easily identify their role and status in the environment, which is the activity they must perform in society, and carries with them a status that ensures that individuals select products that communicate a role or status, whether real or desired, in society (Kotler, 2006).

By doing and learning, individuals take to themselves beliefs and attitudes that influence their buying behavior. A belief is a descriptive idea that an individual has about something. Beliefs can be based on knowledge, opinion or faith. They may or may not contain an emotional additive. These beliefs constitute concepts of brands and products and people act in accordance with these concepts. It is possible for the company to launch campaigns to correct mistaken beliefs that inhibit the purchase of a product or service (Kotler, 2005).

Attitudes correspond to learned predispositions to respond to an object. Consumers cultivate attitudes to a variety of objects that theoretically summarize the consumer's assessment

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of a product, brand or company and represent positive or negative feelings towards them, as well as their behavioral tendencies (Belch, 2008).

Over time, society has been characterized by several changes in the way it communicates, evolving from rudimentary communication to the exchange of information through digital spaces. But it wasn't just the way of communicating that changed, the way people work, buy and relate, it also underwent major changes. This becomes more and more evident when looking at the younger age group. This younger layer, which is born familiar with new technologies, is characterized by being highly informed and capable of communicating in a way that, a few years ago, was totally impossible (Ferreira Filho and Nascimento e Sá, 2012).

2.2 The Influence of Social Media on Consumer Behavior

The internet has an important role in this transformation, some of its tools helped in the construction of a new method of communication between people. Among these tools, social networks stand out. Currently, social networks have a significant number of active users and are increasingly available to people. In a study produced by the We Are Social agency in partnership with the media platform Hootsuite, data was collected from 22 million users in 45 countries. It was found that of the 7.6 billion people in the world, 4 billion (53%) have internet access, 3.1 billion (42%) are active users of social networks and 2.9 billion (39%) use social networks by their mobile devices, especially smartphones (We are Social and Hootsuite, 2018).

Social networks are excellent tools that allow greater communication between people all over the world, simply and quickly. So today, even small businesses are looking to interact with their customers through these networks. Some studies have shown that there is a relationship between social networks and consumer behavior, especially in purchasing decisions (Ferreira *et al*., 2017).

Studies involving the variables social networks and consumer buying behavior, carried out in the last five years, focus on this theme in specific niches, such as gamer products (Oliveira and Moreira Neto, 2016) and air travel (Brito and Freitas, 2019). Or they analyze informal trade groups within a specific social network (Sousa Júnior *et al*., 2018). They also seek to verify whether there is an association between gender and the purchase of products indicated on social networks, and whether there is a difference in the importance given to indications or evaluations arranged in the social network by gender in the selected sample (Fonseca *et al*., 2015).

Social networks have brought great changes in behavior for all of humanity, in the way they relate, in the speed with which information is exchanged, influencing people and awakening in these people interests they didn't even know they had.

For Frazão (2013), there was a change in the way individuals search for what they need, and how they view the news that are on every corner and how they know the quality of each product before using them, social networks are created by people and they determine when, where and when they want to use the environments and social platforms.

According to Adolpho (2010), social networks are a means of expressing our lifestyle, as they are human and uncommitted expressions, they bring much more credibility to each other. The spirit of social media goes beyond talking to our friends or the collection of friends we make in each of these tools, they are a part of our identity.

Social networks are networks of people wherever they are, the way these people relate is what determines whether this network is in person or digital, they are important options to expand your contacts and keep them solid, updated and tuned in (Grando, 2012).

One of the main goals of social networks is to encourage people to interact, give and seek opinions, with this, the digital seller must participate and contribute to this use. It is important to note that people also use the internet for entertainment, such as leisure, promotions, discount coupons, among others. Social networks allow you to post photos and videos, including commenting and sharing your links, hotsites (Frazão, 2013).

It is extremely important for a company to have a social profile on a social network, it is through this tool that the entrepreneur can keep track of satisfaction, desires, problems, resolutions and others. Being connected at all times is essential to be able to resolve all issues related to the customer, so that he does not migrate to the competition.

According to a survey carried out by TracyLocke Brasil in association with Behup, around 70% of Brazilians changed their consumption behavior, starting to buy more online, including those who had never carried out this action and giving preference to local businesses with products specific and necessary for survival, such as food (Globo, 2020).

The study had the participation of a thousand people from all Brazilian states and was carried out throughout the month of March, with the aim of identifying the impacts not only of the virus, but of social isolation on people's purchasing behavior. The results show that 66.2% of people started to buy food, hygiene and other groceries in markets, bakeries and pharmacies in the neighborhood, and 20% claim to have changed their purchasing behavior in an extremely radical way.

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Meanwhile, Sebrae is responsible for disseminating the survey carried out by the Nielsen Institute which points out that the consumption behavior of Brazilians during the pandemic is more focused on products related to health, food, hygiene, cleaning and the internet, in view of the isolation and the very common imposition of working and studying remotely (Sebrae, 2020).

Businesses in general suffer from the implications of the pandemic and need to develop new ways to connect, approach, capture and retain customers. Not only for growth purposes, but mainly as a safety measure for the continuity of the business' useful life.

3 METHODOLOGY

To carry out this study, we used the bibliographic research method of a quantitative nature to assess and understand the opinions and behavior of respondents, in which we obtained the data through a multiple choice questionnaire through Google Forms that was made available by the members of the group for the people.

The bibliographic research is based on the survey of theoretical references that have already been analyzed and published through writings and electronics, such as books, scientific articles and web site pages (Fonseca, 2002). Qualitative research is not concerned with numerical representation, but with deepening the understanding of a social group or an organization (Gerhardt and Silveira, 2009).

An application questionnaire with 24 questions was prepared, its application lasted 5 days and was disseminated through WhatsApp, Facebook and LinkedIn. 330 valid responses were obtained from the form, but there was a need to discard 16 responses representing 4.8% of the total, as these respondents had never shopped online.

A questionnaire was applied that encompassed the variables that influenced the online purchase process highlighted by Philip Kotler (2005) and Gary Armstrong (2015) in the theoretical framework of this work.

After applying the questionnaire, the data were processed using Excel to generate graphs, aiming to achieve the relevant objectives of preparing an analysis of consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the needs, reliability, difficulties and index are verified. to consume online.

4 RESULTS ANALYSIS

According to Waengertner (2018), the dynamism of the market cannot change because it is stated that the speed of change has been increasing in recent times. In this way, what used to be certainty can quickly turn into doubt with new consumer habits and technologies. The new coronavirus pandemic showed that companies need to innovate to serve consumers, who have new needs, values and consumption habits, otherwise they will be extinct.

Therefore, the sample totaled 314 people, in which the majority of respondents were women (71%) and the total age range of the sample varied according to Graph 1.

Graph 1 – What is your age group
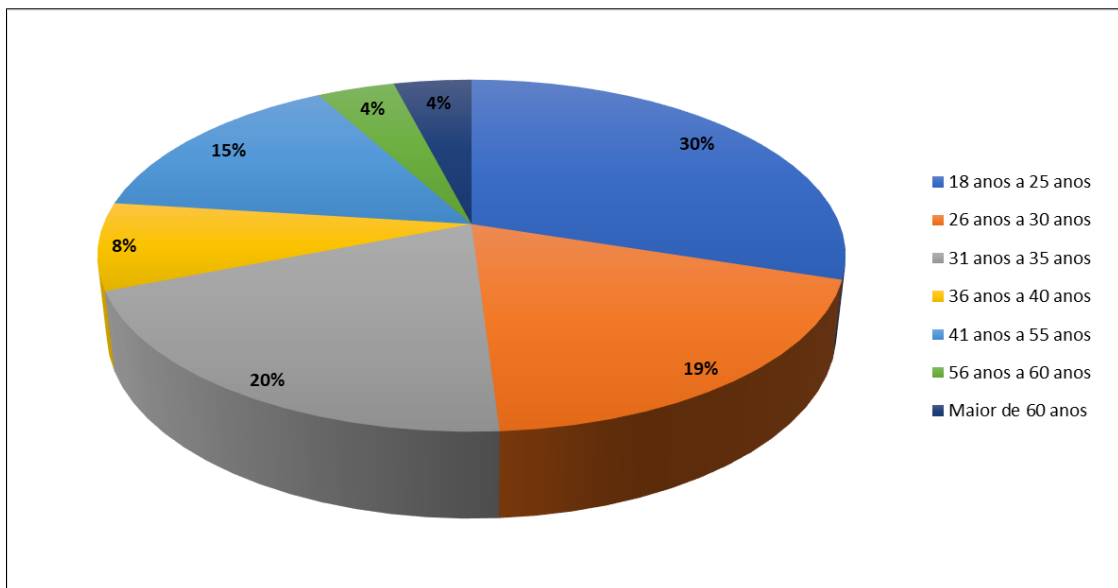
Source: Prepared by the authors.

Regarding the majority of women who responded to the survey, it is important to highlight that women are responsible for purchases in 96% of households according to the study conducted by Nielsen (2019 apud ALMEIDA *et al*., 2020), a global measurement and data analysis, in relation to the behavior of Brazilian consumers. Also, women are more likely to answer survey questionnaires like this one.

Data indicate that 70% of respondents are currently working and 65% of respondents have a family income of up to R$ 5,225.00.

In general, the most purchased products in the last 8 months with 31% of responses consist of essential items (food, personal care product, cleaning product, medicines), followed by

cosmetics (beauty and perfumery) with 15% of responses and pet products with 14% responses. Items of fashion and accessories got 11% of responses, electronics and/or appliances items and online courses got 7% of responses, books and magazines got 6% of responses, furniture 5% of responses and other items got 4% of answers.

Data indicate that 76% of individuals were already in the habit of shopping over the internet before the pandemic. The advent of the coronavirus and the consequent closing of stores influenced online purchases, as 95% of people indicated that they or someone from the same household shopped through the internet during the period of social isolation, representing an increase of 19%.

Thus, the survey proves the importance for companies and brands to command sales techniques over the internet.

> Smaller companies, which are still not paying attention to this, need to start marking their presence on the internet in some way, whether through an institutional website or blog, by participating in social networks, or by advertising such as banners on large portals, sponsored links on search sites, among other options, or start an e-commerce operation to carry out commercial transactions over the web. And the reason for this is very simple: because conventional customers and especially potential ones are there, as well as competing companies (Turchi, 2017, p. 6).

Also in relation to shopping online, 50% of respondents indicate that they have already purchased products and/or services over the internet, 44% responded that they frequently make purchases over the internet and 6% responded that they prefer someone else who has the habit of shopping through the internet, make the purchase for them.

Graph 2 shows the average consumption in online purchases in the last 8 months.

Graph 2 – How much did you spend on average in the last 8 months on online shopping?
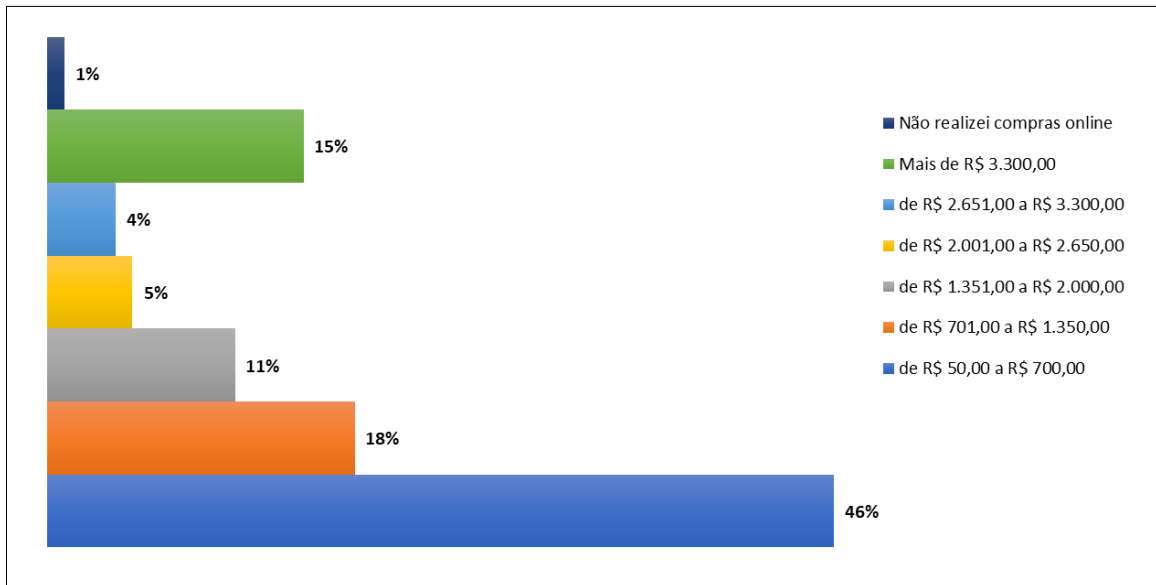
Source: Prepared by the Authors.

It appears that most individuals (46%) consumed products at a relatively low value, when compared to the others. It is noteworthy that 15% of individuals made purchases above R$ 3,300.00, a substantially high amount, which was not expected in times of pandemic.

Regarding the form of payment, 50% of respondents indicate that, when shopping in online stores or physical stores, they pay in cash, 45% pay in installments and 5% pay through credit available through PayPal, PicPay and Cash back.

The data indicate that most people interviewed believe that both forms of purchase (online or through physical store) are advantageous, 28% of people prefer to buy online and 21% through physical store.

With the advent of technology, the internet, information and the digital transformation, several authors (Turchi, 2017; Mendes and Bueno, 2018; Vaz, 2011) expose the importance of incorporating online service and sales strategies, however, entrepreneurs still they are reluctant to reinvent their businesses in this dimension (Almeida *et al*., 2020).

In this sense, making use of omnichannel strategies can be an alternative. According to Almeida *et al*. (2020, p. 4):

> Carvalho and Campomar (2014) propose this approach related to the idea that customers can access information online even though they are inside a physical store, having contact with promotions, prices and advantages. Omnichannel aims to integrate the available channels - physical and virtual - in order to conquer and adapt to the consumer who demands quick responses and more options in retail.

Graph 3 shows the aspects that can induce the consumer not to make a purchase through online stores.

Graphic 3 – What can prevent you from buying through online stores?
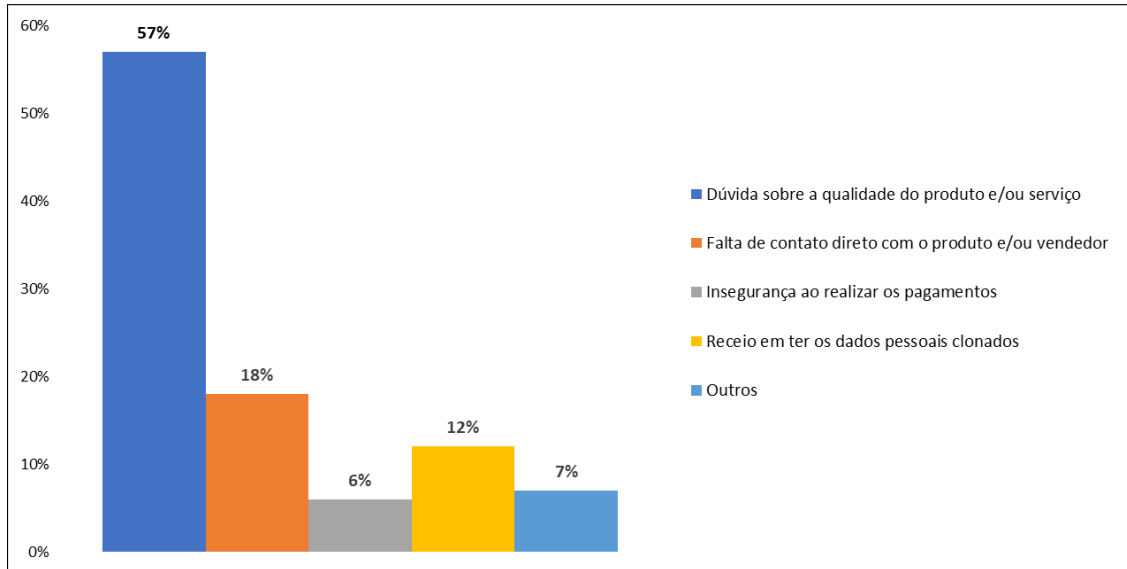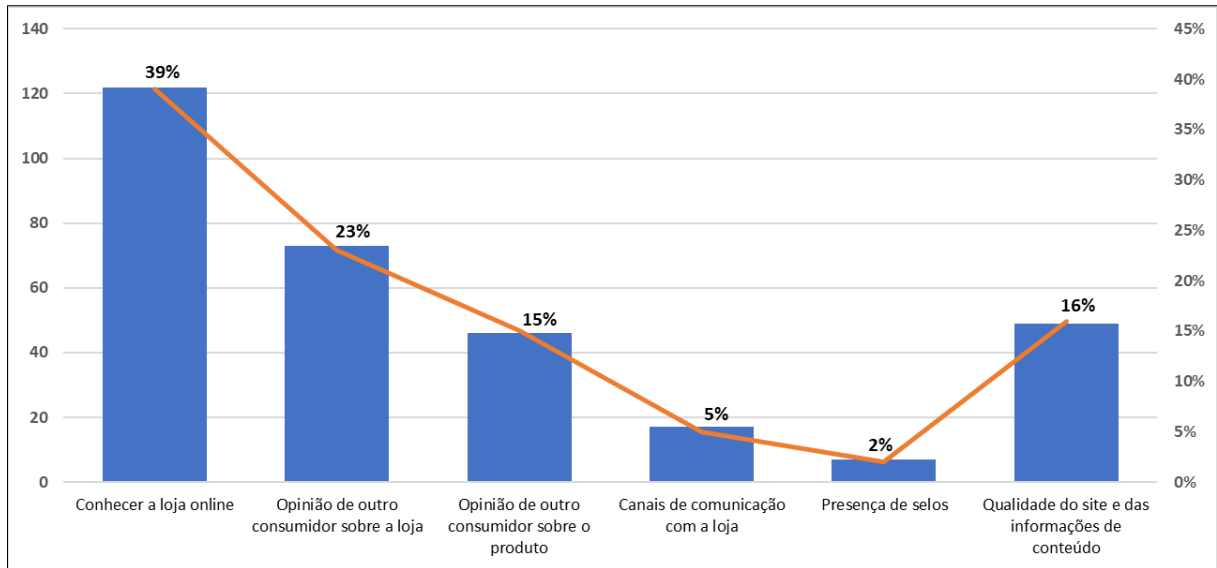

Source: Prepared by the Authors.

The main reason given by consumers is doubt about the quality of the product and/or service (57%). In addition, the lack of direct contact with the product and/or seller (18%) and the fear of having the data cloned (12%) also receive a significant percentage, 7% of consumers had other reasons and 6% were insecure about the make payments.

Graph 4 shows the fundamental aspects regarding the safety of online shopping.

Among the information collected, it appears that the main concern of consumers is knowing whether the store is trustworthy, with 39% of consumers responding that the safest aspect is knowing the online store and 23% of consumers reporting that the opinion of another consumer on the store generates more security, accounting for 62%. The second fundamental aspect that gives consumers security to purchase online is the quality of the website and content information, with 16%.

Graph 4 – Which aspect gives you more security when shopping online?

Source: Prepared by the Authors.

In this sense, consumers showed that the most important channel to know the reputation of the online store and make the purchase decision is through the advertisement here (24%), followed by the opinion of friends and consumers (22%), social networks (20 %), search sites (16%), store site (14%) and advertising (4%).

"It is necessary to understand that the consumer does not want to see only the explicit sale of products, it is necessary to communicate, generating content that adds value to their lives, that contributes with something" (Almeida *et al*., 2020, p. 4).

"Your content needs to add value. The idea of having specialist content is to deliver useful information to those who need it" (Rez, 2016 apud Almeida *et al*., 2020, p. 5). According to Almeida *et al*. (2020), if the individual follows social networks and websites, and does not find useful content in relation to what the company sells, value is not generated and the company's reputation may be negative. Therefore, at this time of pandemic it is necessary to plan and/or re-plan communication strategies and, thus, the sale will be a future consequence of a positive image built in this scenario.

Despite the fear on the part of many consumers, a large part of the responses (55%) showed that the reason that led them to make the purchase over the internet was due to the product being more accessible in relation to the price. Among the other reasons are: stores closed due to social isolation (32%), influence of advertising in digital media through social media (10%) and digital payments that allow you to receive money back (3%).

The data indicate that 74% of consumers are more secure in shopping at online stores in companies that also have physical stores. In addition, 74% of people indicate that they have come to rely on digital means to make purchases, but 26% of people still prefer the option of making purchases through physical stores.

Finally, the survey indicates that 92% of respondents intend to continue shopping through digital media after the pandemic.

5 CONCLUSION

This study examined how social media played an important role in the purchase decision process of consumers during social isolation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the current scenario due to social isolation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study understands the importance of digital marketing and social media for the communication of companies with their consumers.

The coronavirus pandemic accelerated the process in terms of knowledge of people's behavior when consuming products and services. Many consumers bought only through physical stores, but with social isolation they realized that they need to reinvent their consumption habits from traditional to online mode, however companies must also pay attention to new demands, especially with regard to the world according to the needs of the consumer.

There is a trend towards hybrid consumption, that is, to make purchases not only in physical stores, but also through applications, websites and social media, determining that the offline world (store/physical sale) is integrating with the online world (digital store/sale), which does not mean having to become a purely digital company, but having a greater online presence.

The main difficulty was adapting the study to the current context caused by the disease of the new coronavirus, where some people interviewed never shopped online, therefore they had to be removed from the study. A more comprehensive study is recommended, verifying the greatest difficulties and which reasons impact on making or not shopping online, proceeding with sampling in both personal and digital ways.

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