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COVID-19: DIFFICULTIES FACED BY CHINA'S RETAILING INDUSTRY AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO OVERCOME THEM

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Abstract:

Since the spread of COVID-19, the world's economy has been seriously affected with the retailing industry being one of the hardest hit industries. China is one of the earliest countries to experience the virus outbreak and economy depression in the first quarter of this year and its retailing industry has gone through many challenges which witnessed a change in consumers' buying decisions. For this reason, it's very necessary for marketers to think about how to respond to the changes taking place in the retailing industry and overcome their shortcomings in the new era. In this paper, we will describe the difficulties faced by the retailing industry in China and discuss some recommendations that can be undertaken by the retailers, small and big alike, to better manage their business in the time of Covid-19. The recommended measures can serve as a guide for other countries to alleviate the impact caused by the coronavirus.

Keywords:

COVID-19, Retailing Industry, Consumer Behaviour, Post-Lockdown

Introduction

In the beginning of 2020, China has been suffering from a sudden epidemic, the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19). According to the Worldometer (2020), the overall confirmed cases are over 38 million people. The top five countries are the US, Brazil, India, Russia and France. Among the five countries, the top four recorded over one million cases. These numbers not

only showed the severe impact that this virus has brought to human beings, also indicated the process of fighting with it would be a long-term contract.

Governments around the world chose to lock downs countries and close the physical operations of business temporarily, etc. in order to prevent the spread and infection caused by COVID-19. However, all of those lockdown policies have led to a decline in consumers' spending as they decrease their social activities and commuting and increase in the number people eating at home, work from home, online learning, and the most important is there is a certain number of people has lost their jobs and experienced a decrease income. Until now, the spread of COVID19 has affected individuals in terms of how much to consume. For China, its economy has witnessed a 3.2% regression in the first quarter of 2020 (Fernandes, 2020). And according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2020), the total sales of consumer goods in January and February has dropped dramatically by 20.5% (Figure 1). However, from March 2020 onwards, the expenditure on groceries from online retailers has experienced an obvious and steady increase each month. The two major online shopping platforms in China, Alibaba and JD.com Inc. reported that their online sales of daily groceries, fresh products, and consumer daily necessities increased dramatically during the stay-home period, contributing to the country's online retailing sales of physical goods by 3% to 1.123 trillion yuan in January and February of 2020 (Kang, 2020).

The retailing industry engages directly and indirectly with citizens' lives and collaborates with other sectors and industries and make a contribution to those sectors' growth to varying degrees. Thus, the value created by retailing industry could not be disregarded. And for now, stores in many countries have resumed their business but the pandemic has caused consumers to alter their buying habits and decisions. It's very necessary for marketers to think about how to respond to the changes and counter their shortcomings in the new era. China is ahead of the curve in its recovery from the outbreak of the coronavirus, and most provinces have begun to return to regular activities. In this paper, we summarized some approaches and measures that China has done. This is done in hopes that the revelation may help to allay the stress due to the outbreak and offer consumers fresh, enriching experiences and somewhat assuage the effects of COVID-19 on the retailing industry and assist industry practitioners to perform smoothly during the post-COVID-19 recovery in other countries.

Difficulties Faced by Chinese Retailing Shops
The pharmacies, grocery stores and online commerce market place seemed to be sustainable with consumers. As they are the necessities with citizens' access to essential products (i.e food, mediation and self-protective products, and other "stay home" needed categories). However, the dramatic decrease in market demand and production has a significant impact on consumption. The worst affected industries are all related to consumers' consumptions. For example, apparel and textiles related stores, food and beverage, transportation, tourism, retail, offline education and training, and some department stores, etc. Those negative results are caused by the following reasons.

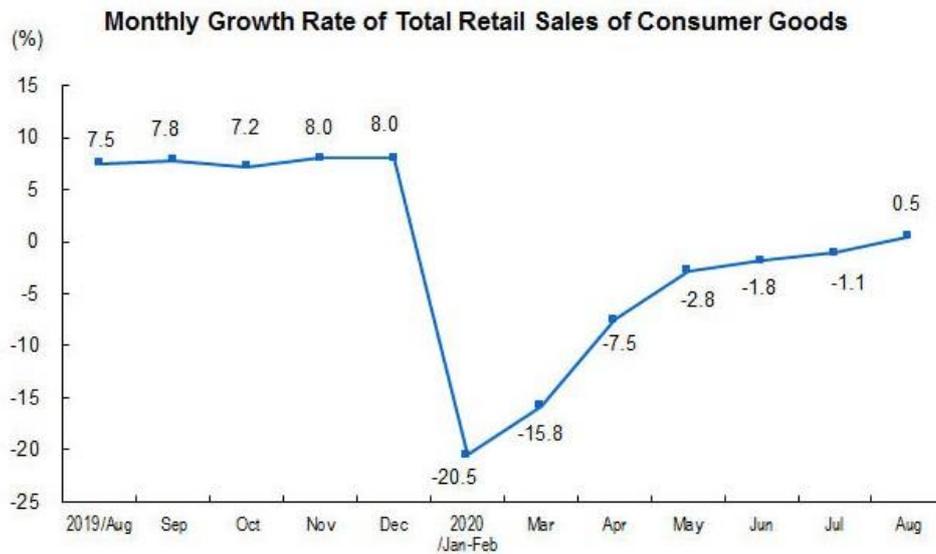*Decrease In Citizens' Spending Power During the Stay-At-Home Period*

Figure 1: Monthly Growth Rate of Total Retail Sales of Consumer Goods (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020)

Generally, as long as the price of products are constant, when there is a change in the income level and then citizens' consumption of goods on the basis of income will also change. This means customers will spend more when their income increases and spend less if there is a drop in their income levels (Ailawadi & Neslin, 1998).

According to the Cheng (2020), there are about five million people in China who lost their jobs in January and February of 2020 due to the outbreak of the new coronavirus. And based on the data released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the urban unemployment rate jumped in February to 6.2%, as the highest one on record. Mao Shengyong, the speakeperson for the National Bureau of Statistics (2020), emphasized that the unemployment rate will tend to drop in the second half of the year when the business gets back to work.

Decrease in In-Store Shopping Frequency

As there is still no vaccine or specific treatment available yet, it's necessary to issue social distancing when going out (Lee 2020). As a result, citizens chose to reduce their frequency of going out.

Deloitte China and the China Chain Store & Franchise Association (2020) has conducted a survey on China's retailing industries across 15 provinces and major cities throughout China in the early of 2020. And most of the respondents are from Guangdong province, Shandong province and Beijing. This survey has included respondents from supermarkets, convenience stores, shopping centers, and specialty stores. Among them, over 90% of the businesses indicated that COVID-19 has made the number of customers and shopping frequencies dropped. And 37% of the respondents said the drop is more than 50%.

When the Lunar New Year holiday in China had been extended and people were suggested to stay-home. Consumers went to supermarkets for stocking up essential products, including face masks, toilet paper, fresh vegetables and fruits, meat, dairy products, and self-hygiene products.

Hoarding behavior is defined by Chu (2018) that people have the sense of uncertainty, then buying and collecting a large amount of possessions which is much more over the current needs, for the future supply. This hoarding behaviour has disrupted the supply order of most stores.

Besides of issuing the social distancing, when consumers go outside and shop in the physical stores, they are normally asked to wear masks, have their temperature taken when they enter into stores, and sterilize their hands. There is no denying that these requirements could help consumers to protect themselves and reduce the risk of being infected. However, when countries experience summer, wearing masks under the hot weather has brought a lot of inconveniences for going outside.

Fear of going out, hoarding behaviour and the inconveniences of in-store shopping have made the consumers shopping frequency dropped dramatically.

Financial Burdens

In Deloitte's survey (2020) on China's retail enterprises, 26% of the respondents expected the funding shortfall. Figure 2 presents the multiple causes of the financial pressure on retailing business in China during the virus outbreak (Deloitte, 2020). Among them, the HR-related cost and Rental Payments were constantly at the top across the outbreak period. And the Supplier payments, pandemic-related cost, cash flow return issues, and loan/interest payments were ranked by a decreasing order, which were 63%, 54%, 37% and 34%, respectively.
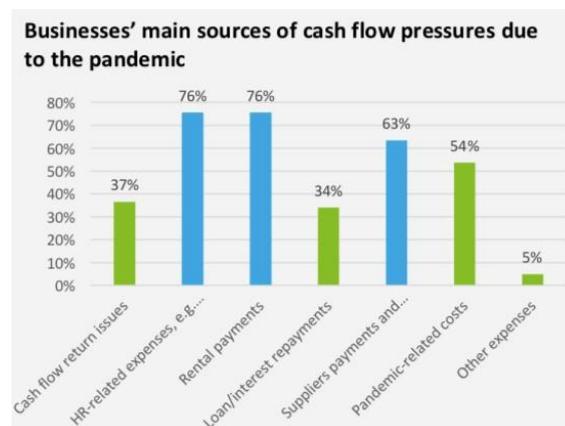

Figure 2: The Multiple Causes of Financial Pressure on China's Retailing Business (Deloitte, 2020)

Recommendations for Retailing Practitioners and Policymakers

There are some measures on how retailing practitioners and policymakers can survive under the pressure of a COVID-19 outbreak in China. Also, these recommendations can give the assistance to other nations who are fighting the pandemic.

Avoid The Risk of Overcrowding in Physical Stores

Based the guidance given by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020), overcrowding is one of the major source of transmission of diseases with epidemic potentials, including respiratory infections. And the definition of coronavirus noted by the WHO is an infectious respiratory disease caused by the newly discovered coronavirus. The way to spread this virus is mainly through infected person's saliva or the discharge of nose when the virus carrier cough

or sneeze. Therefore, the first primary key that practitioners should be concerned about is avoiding the risk of consumers overcrowding in stores and manage social distancing in stores, with the aim to rebuild the confidence of their employees and consumers to work and spend in the physical stores.

As one of the symptoms of COVID-19 is fever, employers should screen their employees by recording their body temperature to keep the shop safe before reopening. Also, recording every entering customer's body temperature is a necessary action to protect shop staffs and other customers.

To avoid the long waiting line, many shops in China drew the social distancing line (space the queue one meter apart) on the floor outside the shops. And in France, a company used a paper ticket machine to manage their visitors flow (ESII, 2020).

Therefore, providing a safe shopping environment is very important for offline shops. Offering shop employees with sufficient self-protective equipment (i.e. face masks, protective clothing, etc.), disinfecting the store areas regularly and offering one-time use sterilizing facilities for customers (i.e. hand wash liquid, alcohol wipes, etc.) are very necessary to cut the spread route of virus instore and provide a safe environment.

Adapt To the Changes in Shopping Behaviour

All the consumption behaviour is on the basis of time and location. Consumers' shopping habits are developed over time about what, when and where to consume (Sheth, 2020). With the lockdown and social distancing, people's shopping choices have been limited and changed as well. Work towards economic recovery, consumers are expected to spend as this keeps retailing stores in the market. Understanding and coping with the changes in consumer behaviour and preferences under the new norm could be practical and effective.

During the outbreak, consumers tend to shop online for grocery shopping, also they are more likely to have DIY projects at home. When there is a shortage of product availability, people are more likely to be motivated to indulge in DIY projects (Wolf & McQuitty, 2013). Consumers with more flexible time at home tended to fulfil their utilitarian needs with DIY projects, like experimenting with home-made recipes, learn a new musical instrument, and discovering a new hobby like painting and calligraphy. Based on this, brands and shops should target their promotion strategy with citizens' DIY talent. For example, food and cookware industries or brands could make some cooking videos with their products. Moreover, they could cooperate with social media influencers, let them to post the product placements on their social media accounts. This could cut down the advertising cost on traditional channels, like TV advertising, in-store promotion campaigns, and reach their customers through online platforms without face-to-face contact.

For the inconveniences and difficulties which have made the in-store shopping frequency much less than the normal days, physical stores should consider adopting delivery services around the neighbourhood. Store owners could use social media to keep in touch with their consumers, when consumers put the order, they can arrange the delivery as soon as possible. In China, the major take-away platforms are Meituan Waimai and Ele.Me (Statista, 2020a). These platforms mainly offer information search and delivery services. Platforms like these are compatible with both big and small businesses. Merchants can easily register on these platforms, then receive

orders from the customer side. After the order is created, platforms will arrange a delivery guy to pick up it from stores and deliver to consumers. And delivery information like the route, waiting time, and the delivery man's body temperature are listed on the apps. This kind platforms are not only available for restaurants, also for other retailers like grocery shopping, convenience stores, as this is a good way to avoid crowding in stores. And for merchants, this is a possible solution to reach their consumers. In order to provide risk-free delivery services, both the merchants and take-away platforms need to monitor their employees' health status daily and sterilize the shop environment and the vehicles used for delivery.

Group buying with the unit of residential community has been proven to be useful in helping suppliers, especially the suppliers from the rural areas. Community group buying (CGB) usually happens with the condition of buying with minimum quantity or monetary amount, and then the vendor would give the group of customers discounts on their group purchase (Tsai, Cheng, & Chen, 2011). Normally, customers are happy with the money discount and the sellers are happy with the multiple sale in once (Kauffman & Wang, 2002). As the antecedent of CGB is collective procurement (Umit Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007), and this shopping strategy matches the characteristics of Chinese culture, it grew wildly and has been most successful in China (Chen, Chen, Kauffman, & Song, 2009). As time passes, the CGB channel also shifted to the online channels associated with e-commerce platforms and social media. WeChat, the number one social media platform in China (Statista, 2020b) with over 1.2 billion active users has become an online group-buying platform during the lockdown period. During the stayhome period, most citizens could not gain access to fresh daily supplies as usual, so each local community created WeChat groups and posted the product catalogue in those groups which enabled citizens, especially the senior citizens who are not familiar with online shopping, to buy essential products through the community WeChat groups. And then the products were delivered at a certain time outside each community. Citizens in there could pick-up by themselves (Shi, 2020). Moreover, as the disruption of the logistic system during the lockdown, farmers who cultivate fresh products could not reach their target markets, they also chose to join the local community WeChat groups to meet the potential individual buyers. Citizens could group together for bulk buying these fresh products. And for farmers, they have emptied their stocks through WeChat group buying. Thus, the group buying via WeChat has become most popular during the outbreak in China (Shi, 2020).

Embracing take-away platforms and community group buying could be useful examples to help merchants and small suppliers from outskirts to reach consumers. It is obvious that instore shopping has faced a severe challenge since the worldwide outbreak. Thus, adapting with the changes in shopping behavior is very essential for the merchants in the new era.

Maximize The Use of Digital Platforms

Digitally mature businesses are better able to get in touch with people and other organizations (Fletcher & Griffiths, 2020). As the lockdown policy caused citizens to stay at home, work from home and factory production to lag behind, this has led businesses and organizations to think of becoming digital maturely or to consider how to use the digital platform wisely.

During the quarantine period, a series of new systems and software have become popular to cater to consumers' change in lifestyle. For example, video conference systems, distance learning systems, cashless payment systems, etc. As scientific fact has shown, the coronavirus can live for hours to days on surfaces depending on the different kinds of material. For paper,

the lasting time varies from few minutes to five days (WebMD, 2020; Healthline, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure the adoption of mobile payment systems in the shops. The Internet or digital technology can not only shorten the communication distance between people, it has also accelerated the mode of online trade (Shaikh & Karjaluoto, 2015; Smith et al., 2013).

Over the past decade, the world market has witnessed the emerging and fast development of ecommerce. And now, e-retailing has been considered as one of the most important implementations of Internet technology (Doherty & Ellis-Chadwick, 2010). The survey result conducted by Deloitte (2020) highlighted that online shops in China were affected the least from the pandemic. Also, the number of orders on e-commerce platform increased massively during the outbreak.

Evidences showed that online grocery sales have been boosted since the outbreak. Up to now, there are two major online shopping festivals on the e-commerce platforms. The International Women's Day campaigns and the Mid-Year sale campaigns by Alibaba' TMall and JD.com have provided opportunities for brands to boost their sales, and also meet the spending demand for consumers. JD.com indicates that the sales in cosmetics and skin care categories has increased 97% year over year on 8 March. And the 5 top performing brands during the March campaigns were SK-II, Lancôme, L'Oréal SA, Olay and Pechoin (Kang, 2020).

As the negative impact of COVID-19 continues to disrupt the offline stores, brands and store practitioners need to switch to distributions online to reach their customers. In recent years, live streaming with e-commerce has become one of the most effective way for vendors to improve sales performance in China (Sun, Shao, Li, Guo, & Nie, 2019). According to 2019 TaoBao Live Streaming Ecological Development report (Taobangdan and Taobao Live streaming, 2019), live streaming shopping on Taobao.com assisted online vendors to reach over 100 billion Yuan in sales in 2018. Comparing with the traditional online shopping, customer can not only view products via images and texts, they can view the detailed products information by real-time videos held by streamers or online vendors. Consumers spend more time viewing products and the averaged amount is increased as well (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020) and this brings customers real-time experience with products.

Key opinion leaders (KOL) or influencers are the major type of streamers in China's livestreaming shopping platforms, because consumers tend to be more loyal to the KOL than a brand (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019).Viya and Li Jiaqi, the top livestreamers in China, who have more than 28 million followers on their own Taobao page. The number of followers can be a measurement to estimate the KOLs' commercial coverage, market potential, customer loyalty, etc. (Addo, Jiaming, Kulbo, & Liangqiang, 2020). Influencers promote brands or products in their own channel can be counted as celebrity endorsement (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). And brands who use the celebrity endorsement, can have a better relationship with consumers, and customers can have a stronger memory with the associated brands or products than those without endorsers (Dwivedi, Johnson & McDonald, 2015). Here is an example with the power of livestreaming commerce in top live-streamer's channel. Kim Kardashian has launched her own brand perfumes in Viya's channel and sold 15 thousand bottles in a few minutes in last November (Yokoi, 2020).

These examples have proven the growth and power of live-streaming commerce in China. Even in the hardest time of quarantine, live-streaming shopping in Alibaba, JD.com and other

ecommerce platforms were still impacted the least. This can be a long-term solution for brands and practitioners, as businesses with higher level of digital ability are more flexible in the market.

Utilize Pricing Strategies

With the unpredicted difficulties for most businesses, each company still has to face a unique challenge arrangement presently. Some researchers have given a number of recommendations for industries to prepare for the post-pandemic world. Though there isn't one solution that could suit all companies, the pricing strategy still can be the most possible strategy for most businesses.

Price promotion is one of the effective marketing strategies to develop new customers and maintain the existing ones (Anderson & Simester, 2004; Gupta, 1988). And the price promotion is getting more common after the global economic crisis (Bogomolova, Dunn, Trinh, Taylor, & Volpe, 2015). There are some useful examples of price discount in retailing domains, like amount-off format (Kim, Rao, Kim, & Rao, 2011), bundle offers (Janiszewski & Cunha Jr., 2004), and just-below price promotion (Banerjee, Tripathi, & Sahay, 2016), and so on. During the post-disaster period, customers income level is obviously below the old times, as well as their consuming power. Those price discount examples could attract customers coming to the stores, both online and offline types. They not only help retailing stores stay in businesses, they also let consumers get necessities at affordable prices. However, some researchers identified that while price discounting could increase the sales from new customers, sales from the existing customers with durable products are decreased (Anderson & Simester, 2004). As the negative impact brought by COVID-19 on retailing industries could be considered as a longterm thing, therefore, the related pricing strategy should also take long-term development into consideration.

There are two successful examples of maintaining the relationship with customers in the longterm consideration mainly by using loyalty programs, Alibaba and Amazon. Loyalty programs are a comprehensive marketing system which aims to reward and boost consumers' attitude through incentives or stimulus (Kang, Alejandro, & Groza, 2015). Customer loyalty is defined as the combination of consumers' positive attitude and repeat purchase with a business or brand (Dick & Basu, 1994). Loyalty programs focus on the relationship with existing customers and emphasize to increase the average purchase frequency from existing consumers through consolidating their purchase as well as reducing the brands or shops repertories (Sharp & Sharp, 1997).

Both Alibaba and Amazon have adopted paid membership to secure a place in consumers' mind. Amazon is the first e-retailer to use its Prime membership program, and then it has identified that Prime members have ordered more than non-members (Wayne, 2017). Similarly, Alibaba also launched their 88VIP loyalty membership in 2018. 88VIP costs consumers 88 RMB ($13 USD) annually, and it offers a variety of services into this loyalty program (Laubscher, 2018). Both Prime membership and 88VIP have provided cash discount to their members. Also, the paid membership has enhanced customer loyalty. Moreover, the paid membership could bring the brand or company cash flows. Thus, in the short-term, cash discount can assist by attracting consumers to spend. For the long-term consideration under the new norm, using some loyalty programs such as paid membership could be a useful technique to enhance the long-term relationship with consumers.

To sum up, pricing strategy could be helpful in encouraging consumers to spend for both short and long term. Price discount in many forms could be effective in the short-term, and for the long-term run, consider developing loyalty programs that could enhance consumers repurchase decision. Also, essential and critical products' manufacturers and suppliers should avoid price-gouging behaviour during this special period. This is not only to gain good reputation but long-term value creation as well.

Conclusion

The lockdown and social distancing to combat the new coronavirus has brought a lot of difficulties on retailing industries, such as consumers' spending less, retailers' financial burden rising, and consumers' shopping behaviour altered under the new normal. China being one of the earliest countries to battle the coronavirus has accumulated some valuable experiences. Right now, China's economy is recovering steadily, what this country has done could be a valuable experience for other nations. Most innovations in the world originated from the disruptions (Christensen, 2013). So, considering the long-term development is very essential for businesses. Right now, as movement restrictions have been lifted in most parts of the country, stores have turned to exploring new ways of operating under the new normal of consumptions.

For most offline stores, creating a risk-free environment for both employees and consumers is the first consideration when they reopen the shops. Also, coping with consumers' changing shopping behaviour is very important for the shops and brands for later development. After that, reaching consumers and how to meet the consumers' demand in the new era is very necessary for retailing industries. Finally, individuals have learned to deal with the pandemic by embracing digital technologies for working-from-home, online learning, meeting with friends and families through social media applications, and shopping online. For long-term development, brands and practitioners should cope with these changes by improving their digital availability and reaching consumers by directing offline sales to online channels.

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