

**IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANADEMIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA
MARKETING AND BUYING BEHAVIOR OF ONLINE
GROCERY SHOPPERS IN DUBLIN IRELAND.**



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ABSTRACT

The rate at which technological innovation is penetrating the business environment during this COVID-19 pandemic is very swift and has increased competition level. Technology has become a way of life for customers and business owners and has heavily influenced the habits and methods of both parties during a pandemic. The spread of pandemic outbreak across the globe has led to the adoption of digital marketing platform. The tremendous growth of internet or digital marketing in developed countries has become the core of many organizations overall marketing strategies to achieve competitive advantage during the pandemic outbreak. Digital marketing methods focused on internet marketing, blogging, search engine optimization, social media marketing, content marketing, etc. Hence, the need to examine how COVID 19 pandemic has influenced social media marketing and buying behaviour of online grocery shoppers in Dublin has become a major concern. Two theories (The Theory of Digital Psychology and The Theory of Semiotics) were adopted to explain the issues raised. The descriptive survey method was used to obtain information from respondents using a questionnaire (via google form/ online survey) and interview guide (via zoom, phone calls, skype). On the social media platforms used by respondents, majority of the respondents acknowledged the use of WhatsApp and Instagram platforms to get information on grocery stores. This implies that the use of social media has become necessary for building social presence and attracting leads to their store. This implies that COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has further exposed the grocery stores in the selected areas to heighten their online visibility and social media marketing presence. It can, therefore, be concluded that COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has a significant effect on grocery shoppers' awareness of social media marketing ($\beta = .234$; $t=7.108$; $p<0.05$). More so, budgeting and safety of items during COVID-19 pandemic outbreak have a significant influence on the buying behaviour of online grocery shoppers (Budgeting $\beta = .152$; $t=1.999$; $p<0.05$; Safety $\beta = .085$; $t=2.018$; $p<0.05$). It can be concluded that the selected grocery stores have strategies put in place to satisfy the needs of the customers during COVID-19. These include washing of hands by staff vigorously with soap and warm water for some seconds when they first arrive at work, application of social distancing, the appointment of designated sanitation workers, sanitation and cleanliness, home deliveries, disinfecting shopping carts, investment in technology etc. It is worthy to note that COVID-19 has significantly altered the lifestyle and behaviour of consumers across the major cities in Ireland due to fear of contracting the virus and confusion regarding their financial security.

Keyword: Pandemic, epidemic, buying behaviour, social media, marketing, COVID, grocery, technology

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ABBREVIATIONS

IDI: In-depth interview.

KPI: Key performance indicators.

EDI: Electronic data interchange

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The research assesses the effect of coronavirus (Covid-19) on Ireland's online sector. One of the deadly recognized viruses, Coronavirus has already taken the lives of many in nearly half of the world (Rajagopal, 2020; OECD, 2020). This means that economic growth in the country has deteriorated. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused havoc on a global scale, for weeks and months now with no end in sight, disrupting manufacturing, commerce, and human movement in general. Major retailers have had their stores temporarily shut down. In addition, due to low footfalls, medium-sized and small-sized retailers are battling the crisis. Additionally, online companies are not out of the list either. Therefore, this deadly virus is assumed to have a severe impact on the online business in Ireland, especially in Dublin which is the capital and largest city of Ireland. The coronavirus (Covid-19) has a major influence on Ireland's e-commerce, telecommunications, business transport, and culture. This has also taken, and is now taking, several lives. In addition, each country follows the lockdown procedures as a means of preventing measures and Ireland has adopted the same as well.

The massive spread of coronavirus has made COVID-19 to be a worldwide pandemic. Available data provides insights from over 80 countries and two billion active monthly shoppers investing over \$900 billion annually across over 20,000 ecommerce sites. Patterns are emerging both internationally and across regions — Asia-Pacific, Europe, and the Americas. Over the past decade, supermarkets have become a much larger part of Europe's retail landscape, and the current environment is likely to reinforce that trend. Consumers in Europe are currently adjusting to a swift and unforeseen change in circumstances (Kolowich, 2019). This has led to behavioural changes, some elements of which are likely to become equilibrium changes (such as shopping migration and online financial transactions) during this pandemic. Consequently, quantifying and understanding their actions and behaviours is now more critical than ever, to plan for a future that is already here.

Many sectors will be more impacted than others, given all the confusion and demands for social distancing. Restaurants and bars, event spaces and retail stores, are particularly vulnerable. At the same time, consumers are shifting their purchasing

habits and in fact some businesses and product categories are growing. While circumstances continue to evolve every day, more than half (52 percent) of Irish people say they will shop more online because of COVID-19, and 51 percent say they will buy more online grocery stores. In comparison, shelf-stable grocery transactions online in the US have risen significantly in recent days, including Rice (+432 percent), Flour (+423 percent), Canned & Jarred Vegetables (+337 percent), Canned & Dried Beans (+433 percent) and Canned & Dry Milk (+378 percent) compared to January's first four weeks. This growth pattern continues unabated, even in the face of a deteriorating outbreak of COVID-19 in the US. During this pandemic in the UK, Canned & Dry Milk 's online sales has also increased in recent times by more than +350 percent, while Canned & Jarred Fruits increased by +297 percent. Flour sales rose to +623%. Hence, the need to examine how COVID 19 pandemic has influenced social media marketing and buying behaviour of online grocery shoppers in Dublin has become a major concern.

It is worthy to note that COVID-19 has significantly altered the lifestyle and behaviour of consumers across the major cities in Ireland due to fear of contracting the virus and confusion regarding their financial security. For example , a survey conducted by YouGov in March 2020 showed that in the past two weeks, 85 percent of internet users in China and 83 percent in Hong Kong have avoided crowded public spaces, compared to 27 percent in the US and 14 percent in the UK. Shopping mall owners like CapitaLand in Singapore began giving their tenants a 20 to 30 per cent rent relief to satisfy retailers and begin online store operations. In the same way, Ireland's shopping centres have started to experience the pinch and more customers opting to stay home. Mall owners are dealing with sluggish foot traffic, through the quarantines and lockdowns, supermarkets and grocery stores suddenly have an influx of panic buyers who want to stock up their pantries to coast.

As more and more Irish people are retreating to the relative safety of their homes, Online shopping and distribution has offered a temporary solution for the needs and wishes of customers, especially in the hardest hit regions. According to the Nielsen study mentioned earlier, 25 per cent of consumers surveyed in Vietnam said they are buying more items online. In China, Carrefour announced that their food deliveries rose six-fold year-over-year during the Lunar New Year, while in February 2020,

JD.com saw a rise of 215 percent in online grocery sales to 15,000 tons, in just ten days. The growth in spending online is not limited to the basic goods (Kolowich, 2019; OECD, 2020). In Singapore, Awfully Chocolate, a home lifestyle company, Iuiga, and premium chocolate cake maker, announced that their online sales had spiked as they faced a decline in physical store sales during the outbreak. More small and medium-sized stores in Ireland are highly likely to use the internet as a retail outlet to remain open to their customers who are trapped in the home and live through the health crisis.

The rate at which technological innovation is penetrating the business environment during this COVID-19 pandemic is very swift and has increased competition level. Technology has become a way of life for customers and business owners and has heavily influenced the habits and methods of both parties during pandemic. It has caused an evolution in the way consumers think, act, react, shop, and make purchase decisions and the way business owners sell, conduct business, communicate with their target market and attract customers to mention a few. The spread of pandemic outbreak across the globe has led to the adoption of digital marketing platform. The tremendous growth of internet or digital marketing in developed countries has become the core of many organizations' overall marketing strategies to achieve competitive advantage during pandemic outbreak. Digital marketing methods focused on internet marketing, blogging, search engine optimization, social media marketing, content marketing, etc. Now more than ever, customers can sit in the comfort of their homes and order virtually anything on the internet from anywhere in the world and have it delivered straight to their doorsteps. This advancement has caused businesses to be extremely competitive in the means and methods used to create brand awareness, gain customers, and retain them. Different businesses have adopted different techniques and systems for reaching their target market and creating brand awareness, one of which is social media marketing.

Social media marketing can be defined as the use of social media platforms to boost sales, increase brand awareness, build a community, and have a direct connection with customers. Some examples of these social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, etc. Social media has given consumers uncountable options of products and services, more than at any other time in the history of mankind. Consumers now have a wide array of businesses they can

patronize, especially from the comfort of their mobile devices. These features enable businesses, content creators and professionals build brand awareness, reach their customers even in the face of a pandemic outbreak and acquire new customers. The rise in the number of businesses has also caused a rise in the problem of buying behavior. Despite various contributions to this practice, it appears many business owners still fail to detect the best social media platforms to adopt in influencing customers' buying behavior during COVID 19 pandemic. Hence, this study will assist in determining the best social media platforms that can be implemented during COVID 19 pandemic to promote customers' buying behavior.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The spread of Covid-19 pandemic in the past few months (January to June, 2020) has shaped the way companies conduct their businesses and have compelled business owners to understand why shoppers choose between going to the store or making online purchases through the company's official websites. With the incessant spread of Covid 19 pandemic across the globe, the use of social media marketing has become a huge opportunity for businesses to grow and connect with their customers. However, this advancement has its disadvantages, due to the level of saturation of businesses on social media all vying for the attention of the same set of customers. Valvi and West (2012) expanded on what was reported by Kotler and Armstrong (2010) and addressed the growth of online businesses with no physical presence in shop form. A common assumption is that the way consumers make their buying decisions during pandemic outbreak has changed, but Tractinsky and Lowengard (2017) have noted that there is a gap in empirical research on the effect of social media marketing during pandemic on consumer purchasing behavior. Therefore, this research considers filling this void by examining and assessing the changes that have occurred in customer purchasing habits due to COVI-19 pandemic outbreak and the adoption of social media marketing by taking Dublin's supermarket industry as a focus.

1.3 Research Objectives

The following research objectives are defined for this research:

- i. To assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on grocery shoppers' awareness of social media marketing; and
- ii. To evaluate the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers

1.4 Research Questions

The central question for this dissertation is to analyses “what impact does COVID 19 has on the social media marketing and overall consumer buying behavior” with sub-questions as follows:

- i. To what extent does COVID-19 pandemic impact on grocery shoppers’ awareness of social media marketing?
- ii. What impact does COVID-19 pandemic have on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

The following postulated hypotheses are to be tested during this study:

Hypothesis One

H₀: COVID-19 pandemic has no significant impact on grocery shoppers’ awareness of social media marketing.

H₁: COVID-19 pandemic has a significant impact on grocery shoppers’ awareness of social media marketing.

Hypothesis Two

H₀: COVID-19 pandemic has no significant effect on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers.

H₁: COVID-19 pandemic has a significant effect on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers.

1.6 Significance of the study

The results of this study are of great benefit to the following people:

Business owners: The results of this study provide business owners on social media platforms with knowledge on the important key performance indicators (KPI’s) to use as a measure for increasing customers’ buying behavior during pandemic outbreak.

Marketers and data analysts: The findings from this study helps marketers and data analysts by providing relevant statistical information on the effects of social media marketing on the buying behavior of online grocery shopping consumers during pandemic outbreak. It also helps them have a deeper understanding of consumer behavior and habits, means and methods that work the best on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. during pandemic outbreak. It also helps marketers adapt their approaches

and structure their strategies around consumer needs and preferences during pandemic outbreak.

To the Customers: It will help customers understand their purchasing behavior patterns during pandemic outbreak and help them interact with brands better.

Social Media Experts: The findings create a platform for the social media experts to understand the behavioral characteristics of the consumer market on social media platforms. It will also provide them with useful information that can be used to determine whether to adjust or maintain their current algorithm.

To the Researchers: It adds to the body of existing knowledge and serve as a credible reference material for numerous scholars in the field of Marketing, E-commerce, Information Technology and Advertising, as well as other researchers and students.

1.7 Scope of the study

This study focuses on the influence of social media marketing on the buying behavior of online consumers in Dublin, which is the capital of Ireland. Generally, customers in Dublin are skeptical of online market offerings and hence the need to conduct this research as a means of opening the consumer's mind to the global trend. The grocery shopping was selected as the target population, because it is one of the largest e-commerce/online business in Dublin and has recorded landmark accomplishments in the areas of logistics/delivery, customer reach/engagement, and job creation. The research instrument (questionnaire) was distributed to online consumers who have been using the social media platforms for businesses during pandemic outbreak.

1.8 Definition of terms

- Social media marketing: This is a kind of Internet marketing that utilizes social networking websites and applications as tools for marketing.
- Marketing: It is any effort engaged in by a provider of goods or services to make potential customers aware of its products and services, with the aim of making sales and generating profit from such transactions.

- Creative content: This is about providing followers and subscribers with the type of content they crave, something they have not seen before.
- Audience Engagement: Refers to the cognitive or affective experiences that an organizations prospects or costumers have with its media content or brand as a whole, which in turn kindles loyalty and ignites a desire to consume or buy more of a certain product or continue to request a service (Broersma, 2019).
- Brand Awareness: Is creating the possibility for customers know about the existence of a company's product or service, and how to access it (Muhammed Malik, 2014).
- Attractive Advertising: The attempt by advertisers to create appealing sales promotional materials or activities for the purpose of creating awareness, capturing the attention of consumers, and retaining existing consumers (Terkan, 2014)
- Consumer Purchase Behavior: This refers to the habits, patterns of customers and analysis of the inward conviction and information process or emotional conflicts they undergo before making purchase decisions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Prevalence of COVID 19 in the Grocery Industry

Consumer buying behaviour signifies more than just the approach of consumer towards buying a product. Marketing efforts therefore also emphasize on consumer's consumption of services, ideas, and activities. The way consumer buys a product is extremely important to marketers. It involves understanding a set of decisions (what, why, when, how much and how often) that the consumer makes over the time. In normal situations, the consumer's decision whether to choose a product is often related to its intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics (Asioli et al., 2017, Richardson et al., 1994). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a change in the appreciation of the usefulness of some products, the emphasis being on providing food and less on the luxury goods and services sector (OECD, 2020; Ho et al, 2020).

It is also clear that the overt and indirect psychological and social effects of the 2019 pandemic of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) are pervasive and have influenced the purchasing behaviour of consumers across the globe. Throughout recent years, the pandemic has emerged in some countries and continents against the backdrop of an elevated prevalence of coronavirus. The increased demand for staple products is causing difficulties even for the grocery industry, as this increased demand now means less product availability for consumers in need, and a decrease in sales of staple items in the weeks or months to come as consumers will simply deplete their stock at home. Furthermore, grocery stores needed to broaden their online services rapidly at a period when other retailers were only in semi-experimental process owing to comparatively weak demand for online food delivery only a few weeks earlier.

COVID-19 and the resulting economic downturn would mean financial distress for many customers, which will cause them to cut their spending for a few years. It is conceivable that, as a consumerist society, we learn from the current crisis that some products may not always be available to us, that we may not always be able to go to the store and get what we want, or that we need to curb our mobility and related consumption. The longevity of improvement in behavior is possibly based on how long we will have to deal with shutdown scenarios. As a preliminary forecast for the future is concerned, other supermarket models, such as convenience stores already begun before COVID-19, and niche retailers remain under competition from internet

giants, as more and more customers of all age levels are more acquainted and relaxed with online shopping. This is consistent with trends that began before the current pandemic, which is simply accelerating the need for adaptation.

Changes in behaviour regarding safety and protection of health in store environments or the nature of the distribution service are also significant. On the customer side, it could be that many would continue to have a stock of staple products for protection. Other changes in habit may include taking advantage of options that limit in-store interactions, such as buying online, in-store pick-up, curbside pick-up, and subscription services. Therefore, when more of us are increasingly experienced at videoconferencing and preserving social distance controls, we might be more hesitant to enter busy places and prefer to spend more time with our family at home or less commuting to work. This all has implications for how we buy and consume.

2.2 The Emerging E-Marketing

E-commerce is the purchase or sale of goods online or over the Phone. Electronic commerce uses technology such as mobile trading, transfer of electronic money, supply chain management, internet marketing, online transaction processing, electronic data interchange (EDI), inventory management systems, and automated data collection systems. Modern electronic commerce usually uses the World Wide Web for at least one aspect of the life cycle of the transaction, though other technology such as e-mail can also be used.

Ecommerce, also known as e-commerce or internet exchange, refers to the buying and selling of goods or services via the internet, and the transfer of money and data to perform such transactions. Ecommerce, which refers to Internet-driven transactions. Typical e-commerce transactions include the purchasing of electronic books (such as Amazon) and music purchases (album streaming in the form of digital delivery such as iTunes Store), and to a lesser degree, customized / personalized online liquor store product services. There are three e-commerce areas: internet shopping, electrical markets, and internet auctioning. E-commerce helps electronic business.

In general, electronic marketing or e-marketing is any marketing operation that is carried out electronically using Internet technologies. It involves not only ads

advertised on websites but also other forms of online activities such as email and social networking (Gibson, 2011). Every component of e-marketing is digital, which means that it is electronic information that is transmitted on a computer or similar device, although it can of course be connected to conventional offline ads and sales as well. E-marketing is distinct from conventional marketing and targets an active audience rather than a passive audience that completely determines the knowledge to search and a website to visit (Gibson, 2011). Identifying potential consumers in e-marketing thus requires significant time and resources but provides marketers with equal opportunities where they can increase their company visibility (Andreassen and Streukens, 2019).

2.3 The Concept of Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is a method of Internet marketing that employs social networking applications as instruments for creating, providing, and trading offers that provide premium value for customers. Social media marketing strategy builds on marketing principles that are essential to the marketing campaigns. Social media marketing is a mechanism that allows a company to focus its limited resources on the greatest opportunities and gain a competitive advantage that will be sustainable. A marketing campaign should concentrate on the central principle that consumer loyalty is the prime objective.

One of the primary goals of social media marketing is to create original, relevant, relatable, innovative, and exciting content that engage customers and communicates the value of the business to them. The purpose of this is to increase their brand awareness, connect with their customers on a more direct and personal level, get feedback from them, and expand their customer reach. Organizations need to not only create consumer satisfaction (or better, customer delight) but also build customer loyalty to attain corporate objectives. Examples of elements an organization offers that increase consumer trust are measurable, such as:

- Quality of product and service(s)
- Pricing value
- Products or services differentiation (uniqueness)
- Enhanced advantages, such as accessibility, usability, apps etc.

- Value creation

Social media marketing is especially important because it provides a way for brands to become personable. On social media, the personality of a brand is evident, in their content, tone, voice, color scheme, reactions to conflict and controversy, etc. and this creates a level of relativeness between brands and their customers. The social media platform has various means and methods for interaction. By implications, extant literature has shown that social media gives room for customers to interact with brands that otherwise will seem so far away from them.

Clement (2019) argued that social media facilitates good communication. If there was no social media, the process would require a more rigorous process, so based on this, it is safe to say that social media platforms like Instagram bring brands closer to their customers not just in terms of access to services but access to direct communication. This aspect of social media is often referred to as customer or community relationship management (Rouse, 2019). According to Lua (2019), there are five major pillars of social media marketing, which include planning and publishing, analytics and reporting, strategy, listing and engagement, and advertising.

2.4 Customer Buying Behaviour

Consumer behaviour has been the interest of many researchers who have worked to broaden the depth of factors that influence consumers who are looking to make purchases. Consumer behaviour is a mental, emotional, and physical in nature. The goal of every consumer is to have their needs met as perfectly as possible, hence the various behaviour displayed by them when in search of satisfaction. In a report by Richarme, (2007) research on consumer's decision-making process began about 300 years ago. Over a span of centuries, views and discoveries pertaining to consumers have evolved. Consumer behavior as defined by Solomon, Bamossy, et al. (2010) is the process through which "individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires of the consumers".

2.5 Consumer Buying Behaviour and Online Shopping During Covid-19

Covid-19 would have the most important, and visible, short-term effect in cratering consumer trust. Consumer buying behaviour is however an important element in the

study of online shopping behaviour. Wagner, Schramm-Klein and Steinmann (2020) identified nine factors in evaluating customer perception of online shopping, stating that these factors are perception of risk, power, ease, affordability, quality of service, and difficulty in using the websites. Many variables that can affect the online shopping behavior of the consumer are grouped into four main categories: product value, user environment, service quality, and internet retail shopping risk perceptions. Retailer size and credibility also affect consumer trust (Nutley, 2011; Zheng, Zhang & Song, 2020). Customer attitude towards online shopping is also critical dynamics of research on e-commerce. A recent report by Saaksjarvi and Pol (2017) explains that increasing use of the World Wide Web as a B2C commercial tool raises interest in understanding the key issues in building relationships with customers on the Internet.

Wagner, Schramm-Klein and Steinmann (2020) alluded that many cultural influences and aspects of the environment may influence shoppers' behaviour especially during pandemic. Understanding consumer actions is of critical significance for the success of retail goods (Lee et al. 2018; Corbitt, Thanasankit & Yi,). To be successful in its e-commerce strategy a company needs to know the reasons behind consumer buying decisions. Because only a few items appeal to all consumers, an online approach will concentrate on identifying the preferences of potential customers through the use of focus groups, surveys, and psychological research from which companies can prepare their future strategy (Kim and Park, 2018).

Nonetheless, Mahmud, Bhasker, Yogesh & Nripendra (2020). claimed that purchasing consumer habits using e-commerce may not be homogeneous as consumer goods are moving quickly with a much smaller lifecycle compared to products a few decades ago. AlAlwan, Rana, Dwivedi & Algharabat (2018) argued that the study of consumer behavior will allow companies to differentiate their products and to adjust supply chain strategies to the changes. Algharabat, AlAlwan Rana & Dwivedi (2017) suggests that the convergence of e-commerce and the power of social media, where consumers can express their opinions, has had a significant impact on the experiences of individuals, gathering information on various alternatives, choosing a specific product, and making a purchase decision.

2.6 Quality of Digital Presence and Engagement

Social media interaction is fundamentally changing communication between brands and customers (Wagner, Schramm-Klein & Steinmann, 2020; Algharabat, et al, 2017). Zhu and Chen (2015) find that digital presence is an important motivator for creating user-generated content. Social media can offer consumers assistance as well as space for discussions and the exchange of ideas. According to Corbitt, Thanasankit & Yi (2020, digital engagement describes users who contribute to brand-related social media platforms to meet like-minded others, interact, and talk with them about specific products/brands. On the other hand, content-based social media focus on the contents, discussions, and comments on the posted content.

Extant studies on the effect of social media marketing on consumer purchasing behaviour yield varied findings because of their approaches and scope of research. For instance, Duffett (2014) proposed that adverts should be crafted in an interactive and stimulating manner to create appeal, hence organizations must make social media a part of its “marketing communication strategy” to actualize its maximum potential. Carrillat et al (2014) pointed out that Facebook marketing must be witty, creative, and entertaining to elicit desired effect on consumers. Stokes (2013) urged marketers to branded experiences for its audience with the aim of eliciting behavioral responses. Brands should no longer regard social media marketing as a way to reach consumers, but also as an important and cost-effective image-building tool. Social media could therefore eventually compete with more conventional marketing channels (TV and magazines) as an effective tool for building emotional effects with brands (Leong, Huang, & Stanners, 2018). This finding also suggests that rapidly developing digital technology and more advanced Internet users call for more sophisticated marketing programs that make better use of rich, interactive digital media.

2.7 COVID 19 and Buying Behavior of Online Shoppers

New research from online brand management studies provide insight into how the use of online search by people has changed around the world since the COVID-19 pandemic began (Evans, 2020; Stanciu, Radu, Sapira, Bratoveanu & Florea, 2020). The COVID-19 Global Search and Interaction study, based on search information from 100 different companies including Google and Safari, shows just how far-reaching and dramatic the pandemic 's effects have been on several sectors. The UK saw the largest average increase of all examined countries over the period, with

March's online grocery search growth of 385 per cent. This was primarily due to the huge spike in online grocery orders, which peaked in mid-March on the busiest day at 445 per cent above normal (Ho, et al., 2020; WHO, 2020a).

On the other side of the coin, grocery sector in the UK, and similarly in France, collapsed during the same month to just 5 per cent. Online grocery stores were in high demand in Italy, as people were using them to send packages to friends and loved ones. Towards the end of March, local search volume for online grocery services peaked at 114 percent above normal levels and clicks to call these companies reached 198 percent above normal average (Chinazzi, 2020; Evans, 2020; WHO, 2020b).

In Japan, grocery store searches rocketed after the virus outbreak, peaking at the end of February at 307 per cent above normal. Generally, customers are drastically reducing their discretionary spending, which has significant implications for certain sectors, such as hotels, clothing, boots, shoes, out-of-home transportation and entertainment (Rajagopal, 2020; Ho, Hui, Aimee & Zhang 2020). Because many customers are under stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders across the country, they are likely to continue to have decreased levels of buying in these and other categories of goods. In terms of success in the contagion curve, we can see from other countries that are ahead of the United States that purchasing patterns before, after and after the COVID-19 high suggest that consumption in a variety of categories stays small for months or perhaps much longer. This is in line with the expectations of consumers that we may have to wait a few more months, if not longer, before routines can return to normal and many households expect their income to be negatively affected for a long time.

The rise in online buying, specifically for grocery stores, is noteworthy in terms of behavioral changes (Stanciu, 2020). Of all age groups, there is a wide number of customers who first tried to buy online grocery in March, and many will possibly try to purchase online grocery, at least if the pandemic persists. It is of course difficult to say whether a significant proportion of customers would stay loyal to online shopping or go back to the experience of the brick-and-mortar store until we feel secure to do so. For many weeks now, most of us have missed the social shopping experience and the convenience of the online channel might not compensate for that.

2.8 Theoretical Review

2.8.1 The Theory of Digital Psychology

Science plays a vital role in marketing most especially the science of psychology. Although a new term, digital psychology combines two diverse fields of study from the social sciences namely psychology and behavioral economics, and relates their teachings to contemporary digital marketing problems (Paul, 2019). The mix of these three areas of study aims to explain and influence consumer behavior. Digital psychology is also known as web psychology. It creates a method of communication that is influential to the unconscious mind for example, social proof (Brown, 2018). Social proof can be defined as the influence that the actions and attitudes of the people around us, both in real life and online, have on our behavior.

According to (Cialdini, 2006), humans view a behavior as accurate, more correct or acceptable in a given situation to the degree to which others perform or exhibit such behaviors, simply put, this means that human are more likely to follow suit or accept a certain behavior when they see majority of people exhibiting such behaviors, hence the phrase, “if your friends jump into fire will you follow suit?” in some cases the answer will be yes because this is what they see majority of their friends doing. Social proof sort of mirrors mob mentality. Numerous kinds of social proof employed in digital marketing can definitely help aid in improving brand awareness and credibility (Forer, 2018). This begs the question; why is digital psychology so important? And how can it be used to improve a brand? The answer to this simply lies in the ability of a brand to gain the trust of their consumers. Offering social proof can instantly make a brand more believable, credible, and convincing (Andariani, 2018).

The concept behind design psychology (Yablonski, 2018) is that designers can influence human psychology to create a more intuitive product experience. An example of this is ‘Hicks Law’, which states that the time it takes to make a decision, for example, clicking on an ad, increases with the number of and complexity of choices available (Soegaard, 2019). Another example is ‘Cognitive Load’ which has to do with the mental processing power used by the working memory of humans. It states that when the volume of information being received exceeds the space available, cognitive load happens, which affects performance and decision making (Heick,

2019). It is important for marketers to take note and be alert about the following: less is more sometimes; the availability of multiple choices leads to cognitive load.

2.8.2 The Theory of Semiotics

Semiotics is the theory of signs and symbols as a means of communication. It explains how individuals understand messages subconsciously based on their social and cultural programming. The subconscious interpretations of individuals are based on emotions and not information (Nunez, 2015). The purpose of Semiotics is to deliver the brand's message to potential customers through visual representations as these representations are the factors that foster easily identifiable and unique brand identification. Based on this fact, it is obvious how important semiotics is in marketing communications, especially when trying to deliver the same message to very distinct and diverse markets or target consumers (Faizan, 2019).

The goal of any brand is to maximize profits while reducing costs. This can be achieved in multiple ways including the adoption of semiotics. The use of signs and symbols by brands can significantly improve the potential of the brand to communicate the same message efficiently and constantly to a continuously growing audience. There are various semiotic techniques used by marketers for example, visual communication which includes the use of: colors, adverts, logos, type face, etc. and verbal communications in form of metaphors, which can be used to form tag lines, and get the brand message across to audiences effectively (Lawes, 2019).

A good example of this use of semiotics can be seen in a Dettol advertisement for an instant hand sanitizer. The advert tells a story of a woman standing up on a bus holding a physical human hand, as opposed to the usual bus handle, with the tag line 'Whose hand are you holding?' This communicates the message that there are millions of bacteria and germs on busses and that consumers need to purchase a Dettol hand sanitizer to protect themselves from sicknesses and diseases. Apple is the perfect example of a brand that has interwoven itself with brand identity (Faizan, 2019). People buy their products not just because they are great but because their products represent status and a wealthy lifestyle which is why their customers queue for hours to buy hardware. Here, the semiotic representation is pushing the message and trying to convince consumers to buy the product (Arboledas, 2017).

The global rapid changes in technology and communication methods are creating a significant transformation in the business environment, how marketing is carried out and consumer behavior. The motivating factors for consumer purchase behavior are evolving daily. Consumers no longer consume brands only for the projection of their own aspiration or for escapism as they were in the past. In fact, studies have shown a significant increase in consumer's desire to consume goods, to create, and enhance their personal identities for example purchasing Apple products as a show of status (Olbertova, 2018) people do not consume brands, but what they embody and symbolize. The impalpable is quickly becoming the new palpable in marketing. The idea of shifting perception from the obvious and tangible products and services to the ephemeral and intangible signs and meanings will be one of the most fundamental changes in the future of marketing (Pobst, 2017).

2.9 Gaps in Literature

The bulk of empirical work reviewed by the researcher revealed lack of depth and a faint grasp of the research topics, being that most researchers failed to exhaust their topics or actually research the problem, while some completely lacked a theoretical framework. In spite of the many isolated research on Covid 19 consumer purchasing behavior in the South Africa, Australia, Pakistan, UK, and Turkey, there still exists a dearth of in-depth research in Dublin, specifically in addressing the effect of social media marketing on online customers' buying behaviors. Thus, the study is vital currently.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Philosophy

Research strategy and methods are determined by the research philosophy a researcher chooses to adopt which in turn has to do with the way an individual views the world. Knowledge and the process by which this knowledge is developed and a researcher's view about this influences the philosophy to be adopted. (Saunders et al. 2009). For this research, the research philosophy used was *positivism*. Positivism is the term used to describe an approach to the study of society that relies specifically on scientific evidence, such as experiments and statistics, to reveal a true nature of how customers perceived the issues raised.

3.2 Research Design

The research design refers to the overall strategy a researcher chooses to integrate the different components of the research study in a logical way that can be understood. The descriptive survey method was used to obtain information from respondents using questionnaire. Descriptive research is one of the methods of quantitative research methods where a set of variables are constant while the rest of the other set of variables were measured as the subject of experiment with a scientific approach. This design helped the researcher to describe the phenomena or activities been investigated and report what has happened or what is happening and perhaps provide an explanation or justification of such occurrence or occurrences.

The above views therefore, make such a design appropriate and suitable for this study in that it enabled the researcher to describe record, analyze and interpret the conditions that exists in auditing firms, in relation to the subject matter. Under this research design, the use of quantitative and qualitative approach was espoused. The quantitative approach helped to describe the situation, as it exists at the time of research. While the qualitative research aimed at discovering underlying motives or desires, using in depth interviews for the purpose. In other words, descriptive research design was employed through survey (questionnaire), interview, document, and other sources of qualitative data.

3.3 Research Method

The study adopted mixed methods by integrating data collection via questionnaire (quantitative) and semi-structured interview (qualitative). Mixed method is a product of the pragmatist paradigm and it combines both the qualitative and quantitative approaches within different phases of the research. The quantitative approach (a positivist paradigm) was adopted to test or empirically justify their stated hypotheses while the qualitative approach (constructivist or interpretivist paradigm) encompasses all forms of social inquiry that rely primarily on non-numeric data.

3.4 Population of the study

The population of a research study consists of all the individuals chosen from the general population that are of interest to the researcher for a given study. The population of this study consists of the online shoppers that use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. in Dublin. Dublin is the largest city and capital of Ireland.

3.5 Sample size and Sampling Techniques

The simple sample size is used to overcome the challenges of surveying the entire population as it is not feasible to get the required information due to limited time, expenses, and the geographical dispersion of the population. The sample size of this study consisted 250 online shoppers that use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. during this COVID 19 pandemic. The sampling technique adopted for this research study is the purposive sampling and the principle for the adoption of this is based on randomization.

3.6 Sources of data

The researcher made use of a combination of two instruments for the purpose of data collection and the concurrent triangulation of the mixed method design approaches by Creswell et al (2003) was employed. Specifically, the two methods of data collection used were Quantitative and Qualitative methods. In respect of Quantitative method, the major research instrument used was Questionnaire, while the Qualitative method involved the use of In-depth interview (IDI).

(a)Questionnaire: This was designed to gather the primary data for the study. The copies of questionnaire distributed to the online shoppers were divided into various sections. Section A contained questions on the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents (online shoppers). Other subsequent sections covered both close and open-ended questions relating to various aspects of the study and questions that were

raised in the order in which the objectives of the study are arranged. The questionnaire was semi-structured, having both close-ended and open-ended questions to allow for free expression of ideas among the respondents where and when necessary. These copies of questionnaire were administered via **google-form** since the respondents are predominantly literate. The close-ended questions provided options for the respondents to choose from, while the open-ended questions enabled the respondents to freely express their views and opinions on the appropriate questions. The items in the questionnaire were adapted from existing literature as presented in Table 3.1

Table 3.1: Sources of Items in the Questionnaire

s/n	Constructs	Number of items	Source
1	Covid 19 Pandemic Survey	10	
2	Social Media Marketing	10	Andriani, 2019; Andariani, 2018; Brandi, 2019; Carter, 2019; Gregory, 2019.
3	Customers' buying behaviors	10	Rajagopal, 2020; Barnham, 2019; Olbertova, 2018.

The respondents were not required to identify themselves on the questionnaire. This anonymity and impersonality no doubt enhanced the rate of return of the questionnaire and objective response. Responses to the statements will follow the five (5) point likert scale (Strongly agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree and Strongly Disagree).

(b) In-depth Interview: This was designed for gathering primary data needed for the study. The researcher will conduct six (6) in-depth interviews (IDI) with grocery stores managers and supervisors. The identification of respondents was followed by the choice of the interview process. The interviews were conducted without a planned sequence of questions to allow issues to surface organically. This allowed the researcher to decide which narratives required further probing. The interview process consisted of broad questions being asked around topics surrounding motivation and sustainability.

The researcher managed the direction of responses to these questions through summarizing, paraphrasing, and probing. The interviews were all conducted via zoom, Skye, and phone calls due to COVID-19, and no offices opened in the few months. The audio of each interview was recorded on a media recording device and transcribed verbatim following these interviews. The average length of each interview was 15 minutes. All the six (6) interviews were conducted similarly. The interactions were recorded with the aid of tape recorder. The in-depth interviews gave room for flexibility and provide opportunity to probe deeper on some aspects which the questionnaire could not cover. The IDI guide was framed to reflect questions that gave insights to the specific objectives of the study.

3.7 Reliability and Validity of the study

The reliability of an instrument can be determined if it consistently measures what it is intended to measure with the same results obtained. The Cronbach alpha method was adopted to confirm the reliability of the instruments. This is the extent to which the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure and performs as it is designed to perform (Patrick, 2013). To ensure the validity of the research questionnaires handed out in this research, the questionnaire was reviewed on the basis of external validity, more specifically, population validity by the researcher's supervisor, co – supervisors and other senior lecturers in the Department.

The Cronbach alpha result was demonstrated below:

s/n		No of items	Cronbach Alpha's Result
1	COVID-19 pandemic	8	0.736
2	Social media marketing	12	0.831
3	Consumer buying behaviors	12	0.794
Mean of Cronbach Alpha		32	0.787

In the overall, the mean Cronbach's alpha of all constructs measuring COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (independent variable), social media marketing and online consumer buying behaviors (dependent variables) affirmed that the constructs were reliable.

3.8 Method of Data Analysis

The treated and valid copies of questionnaire were coded for analysis and entered SPSS Version 25. Data analyses encompassed frequency distribution, descriptive statistics, and inferential statistics (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2007). The frequency distribution analysis was done by evaluating the number of responses attributable to each question while the descriptive statistics that enabled the researcher to describe and compare data was based on frequencies distribution. Inferential statistics was used to measure formulated hypotheses through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. The use of regression was adopted to predict the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (independent variable) on social media marketing and online consumer buying behaviors (dependent variables).

3.9 Ethical consideration

Of importance is that the researcher makes it a point of duty to guarantee that the data gathered are treated as anonymous and only disclosed to the Supervisors (Panter and Sterba, 2011). The participants in the study were all well informed of their free choice to partake or refuse, hence this gave them more confidence to express their consent. Ethical issues such as the right of respondents to privacy and free-will were envisaged while the potential risks of possible physical harm, and unanticipated measures were provided for. The self- esteems of the participants were respected, while the essence of the work was disclosed to respondents ahead of their responses. The data obtained were analyzed as they were, and objective presentation of the outcome were complied with as much as possible. Likewise, discreteness was applied in disseminating the reports of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH ANALYSIS

4.0 Presentation of data, Analysis, and interpretation

This section focuses on results from adopted presentation, analysis, and data interpretation. It commences with questions that sought responses on respondents' personal data with the aid of a questionnaire based on the study objective.

4.1 Data Presentation

Table 4.1.1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Items		Frequency (n=204)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	103	50.5
	Female	93	45.6
	Prefer not to say	8	3.9
Age	15-25	9	4.4
	26-35	55	27.0
	36-45	32	15.7
	46-55	70	34.3
	56-65	33	16.2
	66 +	5	2.5
Marital status	Single	43	21.1
	Married	150	73.5
	Others	11	5.4

Source: Field Survey (Google form), 2020

Table 1 displays the distribution respondents' gender. 204 respondents were captured out of which 103 (50.5%) of them are males and 93 (45.6%) are females. The table shows respondents' age distribution. The result reveals that majority of the respondents captured for this work fell in ages range of 26-35 years and 46-55 years and followed by 56.65 years. Finally, the table shows that a large percentage of the respondents are married; 11 (5.4%) respondents fall under the category of "others" and 43 (21.1%) of them are single.

Table 4.1.2: Basic Information of Respondents

Items	Frequency (n=204)	Percentage (%)
1. Which of the Social Media Platforms do you often use		
WhatsApp	104	51.0
Instagram	39	19.1
Twitter	28	13.7
Facebook	24	11.8
WeChat	9	4.4
Total	204	100.0
2. Around what time of the day do you check the social media		
5am-10am	48	23.5
10am-3pm	40	19.6
3pm-8pm	106	52.0
8pm-12am	10	4.9
Total	204	100.0
3. How many hours do you spend on social media platforms daily		
1-3 hours	40	19.6
4-6	118	57.8
7-9	36	17.7
>9 hours	10	4.9
Total	204	100.0
4. Which of the grocery store do you often use		
Supervalu	34	16.7
Oriental Pantry Supermarket	29	14.2
Listons Food Store	99	48.5
Kwality Foods Asian Grocery Store	7	3.4
Fresh IFSC	13	6.4
Dunnes Stores	7	3.4
The Good Food Store	10	4.9
Asia Market	5	2.5
Total	204	100.0

How did you become aware of the grocery store page		
Friends	2	1.0
Advert	62	30.4
Google	26	12.7
Social Media	96	47.1
Texts	18	8.8
Total	204	100.0

Source: Field Survey (Google form), 2020

Table 4.1.2 shows that a total of 204 respondents were reached for this aspect of the study. On the social media platforms used by respondents, majority of the respondents acknowledged the use of WhatsApp and Instagram platforms to get information on grocery stores. This implies that the use of social media has become important for building social presence and attracting leads to their store.

From the assertions by most of the respondents, one can safely say that the time of the day that respondents use to check the social media is between 3pm -8pm. It was added that the respondents spend between 4-6 hours daily on social media platforms. Finally, the respondents acclaimed that they become aware of the grocery store page via social media and adverts.

Research Question 1: To what extent does COVID-19 pandemic impact on grocery shoppers' awareness of social media marketing?

Table :4.1.3 Descriptive Statistics for Covid-19

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
Q1	Due to COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, consumers of all ages have shifted to online shopping	36 17.6%	92 45.1%	41 20.1%	30 14.7%	5 2.5%	204 100%
Q2	I have increased my browsing time during the period of	32 15.7%	109 53.4%	32 15.7%	28 13.7%	3 1.5%	204 100%

	Covid-19 for large grocery stores						
Q3	I Shop online and get groceries delivered from any market or supermarket	35 17.2%	71 34.8%	40 19.6%	56 27.5%	2 1.0%	204 100%
Q4	I buy groceries online to avoid the crowd and stay safe	11 5.4%	110 53.9%	41 20.1%	41 40.1%	1 .5%	204 100%
Q5	I am worried about online supermarket for coffee, snacks, chocolate, drinks, fruits, toiletries grocery & groceries during COVID-19 outbreak	10 4.9%	129 63.2%	32 15.7%	33 16.2%	-	204 100%

Note: SA= Strongly agree; A= Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly

The analysis of **COVID-19 pandemic outbreak** item based on the results exhibited in Table 4.1.3 shows that a rather large number of respondents supported the claims that: Due to COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, consumers of all ages have shifted to online shopping. Empirical results also reflected 109 (53.4%) agreed and 32 (15.7%) strongly agreed with the claim. The table further shows that 71 (34.8%) of the respondents agreed and 35 (17.2%) of them strongly agreed with the statement that they shop online and get groceries delivered from any market or supermarket. Importantly, 110 (53.9%) of the respondents agreed and 11 (5.4%) of them strongly agreed with the statement that they buy groceries online to avoid the crowd and stay safe. In conclusion, when respondents were asked whether they are worried about online supermarket for coffee, snacks, chocolate, drinks, fruits, toiletries grocery & groceries during COVID-19 outbreak; majority positively affirmed the assertion with 129(63.2%) agreed while 10 respondents (4.9%) strongly agreed with the claim, showing an aggregate positive affirmation of 139 (68.1%) respondents. Given the level of positive supports to the claims, one can safely infer that majority of the respondents have been influenced by the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Ireland.

Table 4.1.4: Descriptive Statistics for Covid-19 and Social Media Marketing

s/n	Items	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
Social Media Marketing (Mean=)							
Q1	During the lockdown, social media platforms tools are helpful in making enquiries	17 8.3%	97 47.5%	52 25.5%	36 17.6%	2 1.0%	204 100%
Q2	The grocery stores have increased their social media presence since COVID-19 started.	28 13.7%	98 48%	10 4.9%	61 29.0%	7 3.4%	204 100%
Q3	I spend more time browsing social media for a store selling a variety of food products	17 8.3%	86 42.2%	53 26%	43 21.1%	5 2.5%	204 100%
Q4	Grocery stores use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, etc. to provide updates on stock availability	24 11.8%	87 42.6%	54 26.5%	33 16.2%	6 2.9%	204 100%
Q5	The grocery stores use various social media platforms to post pictures of food products, which may be fresh or packaged	13 6.4%	104 51%	45 22.1%	34 16.7%	8 3.9%	204 100%
Online Purchase Behavior (Mean =							
Q1	The lockdown has allowed me to take advantage of shopping online	23 11.3%	100 49%	44 21.6%	36 17.6%	1 .5%	204 100%
Q2	I will continue to spend more online even when the crisis subsides.	17 8.3%	91 44.6%	64 31.4%	22 10.8%	10 4.9%	204 100%
Q3	I am willing to compromise on online product and price, provided the items I need are in stock	6 2.9%	73 35.8%	68 33.3%	48 23.5%	9 4.4%	204 100%

Q4	I believe grocery stores can survive by selling their products online.	40 19.6%	72 35.3%	49 24%	38 18.6%	5 2.5%	204 100%
Q5	Online consumers are shopping collectively because of the COVID-19 pandemic	37 18.1%	74 36.3%	59 28.9%	33 16.2%	1 .5%	204 100%

The analysis of **Social Media Marketing** item portrayed the fact that majority of the major respondents (online grocery consumers) alluded to the fact that during the lockdown; social media platforms tools are helpful in making enquiries. The statistical table also revealed that 98 (48%) agreed and 28 (13.7%) strongly agreed (a sum total of 126 – 61.7% respondents) with the claim that the grocery stores have increased their social media presence since COVID-19 started. On the other hand, the table further shows that 86 (42.2%) of the respondents agreed and 17 (8.3%) of them strongly agreed with the statement that they spent more time browsing social media for a store selling a variety of food products. Importantly, 87 (42.6%) of the respondents agreed and 24 (11.8%) of them strongly agreed with the statement that the grocery stores use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, etc. to provide updates on stock availability. On a final note, 104 (51%) of the respondents agreed and 13 (6.4%) of them strongly agreed with the statement that the grocery stores use various social media platforms to post pictures of food products, which may be fresh or packaged. This implies that COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has further exposed the grocery stores in the selected areas to heighten their online visibility and social media marketing presence.

Further, the items for **Online Purchase Behaviour** revealed that 100 (49%) respondents agreed and 23(11.3%) strongly agreed showing that out of 204 respondents, 123 (60.3%) supported the claim that the lockdown has allowed them to take advantage of shopping online. In the same vein, a total of 108 (52.9%) respondents (91 agreed and 17 strongly agreed) of the respondents affirmed that they would continue to spend more online even when the crisis subsides. Additionally, the table further shows that 73 (35.8%) of the respondents agreed and 6 (2.9%) of them strongly agreed with the statement that they are willing to compromise on online

product and price. Notably, 72 (35.3%) of the respondents agreed and 40 (19.6%) of them strongly agreed with the statement that they believe grocery stores can survive by selling their products online. Finally, 74 (36.3%) of the respondents agreed and 37 (18.1%) of them strongly agreed with the statement that online consumers are shopping collectively because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Test of Research Hypothesis

4.2.1 Test of Hypothesis 1:

In this section, hypothesis one developed for the study was tested using regression analysis. The result is presented below:

H₀: COVID-19 pandemic has no significant impact on grocery shoppers' awareness of social media marketing.

H₁: COVID-19 pandemic has a significant impact on grocery shoppers' awareness of social media marketing.

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	.447 ^a	.200	.196	.47794	
ANOVA					
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	11.542	1	11.542	50.529	.000
Residual	46.142	202	.228		
Total	57.684	203			
Co-efficients					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.564	.123	.447	20.774	.000
COVID-19 pandemic	.234	.033		7.108	.000

Independent Variable: COVID-19 pandemic
Dependent Variable: Social Media Marketing

The table presents the findings, which show the degree to which COVID-19 pandemic outbreak explains the variation in social media marketing. It is represented by a R square of 0.200 and expressed as a percentage of 20%. This shows that COVID-19 pandemic outbreak accounts for only 20 percent of social media marketing awareness among grocery shoppers, while the standard error estimate is .47794, which means error term. The table from ANOVA shows that the F value is 50.529 at the level of significance of .000b.

The implication is that COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has a significant influence on grocery shoppers' awareness of social media marketing ($\beta = .234$; $t=7.108$; $p<0.05$). This implies that a unit change of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak will ultimately lead to increase in grocery shoppers' awareness of social media marketing by 23.4%. Since the model's level of significance is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis should be rejected while accepting the alternative hypothesis. It can therefore be concluded that COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has a significant effect on grocery shoppers' awareness of social media marketing.

Research Question 2: What impact does COVID-19 pandemic have on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers?

Table 4.2.1: Descriptive Statistics for Covid-19 and Customers Buying Behavior

S/N	Statements	SA	A	U		D	SD	Total
	Budgeting							
Q1	The amount of money I have spent on groceries is more than before Covid-19 began	38 18.6%	63 30.9%	39 19.1%		64 31.4%	-	204 100%
Q2	The amount of packaged foods I have been buying has changed since the	12 5.9%	107 52.5%	44 21.6%		41 20.1%	-	204 100%

	coronavirus epidemic began							
Q3	My spending habits changed since the onset of Covid-19.	10 4.9%	126 61.8%	30 14.7%		38 18.6%	-	204 100%
Q4	Food costs have always been on my mind since the beginning of Covid-19.	16 7.8%	95 46.6%	59 28.9%		34 16.7%	-	204 100%
Q5	Since COVID-19 started, I spend close to 20% of my budget on food	22 10.8%	89 43.6%	29 14.2%		59 28.9%	5 2.5%	204 100%
	Safety							
Q1	There is confidence in the safety of the food supply in the grocery stores since the pandemic began	16 7.8%	82 40.2%	54 26.5%		46 22.5%	6 2.9%	204 100%
Q2	The safety of packaged foods since the start of COVID-19 is satisfying	22 10.8%	85 41.7%	55 27%		36 17.6%	6 2.9%	204 100%
	It is unlikely that I can contract COVID-19 from online packaged food ingredients	13 6.4%	96 47.1%	59 28.9%		29 14.2%	7 3.4%	204 100%
Q3	I will return to high streets and malls once safety returns	23 11.3%	107 52.5%	46 22.5%		28 13.7%	-	204 100%
	Purchasing Behavior							
Q1	The ability for owners of grocery stores to meet consumer needs remains high	17 8.3%	84 41.2%	54 31.4%		24 11.8%	15 7.4%	204 100%

Q2	With lockdowns being imposed, we buy products at lower prices in large quantities	2 1.0%	84 41.2%	66 32.4%		43 21.1%	9 4.4%	204 100%
Q3	Since COVID-19 started, we buy products collectively to get a discount.	31 15.2%	85 41.7%	47 23%		36 17.6%	5 2.5%	204 100%
Q4	Since Covid-19 started, I have been focusing on lower prices product(s)	35 17.2%	72 35.3%	58 28.4%		36 17.6%	3 1.5%	204 100%
Q5	I purchase more packaged foods now than before	36 17.6%	63 30.9%	40 19.6%		63 30.9%	2 1.0%	204 100%

4.2.2 Test of Hypothesis 2:

- H₀: COVID-19 pandemic has no significant effect on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers.
- H₁: COVID-19 pandemic has a significant effect on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers.

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	.261 ^a	.068	.059	.60906	
ANOVA					
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	5.467	2	2.733	7.369	.001
Residual	74.561	201	.371		
Total	80.028	203			
Co-efficient					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.

	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.545	.218		11.681	.000
<i>Budgeting</i>	.152	.080	.183	1.999	.048
<i>Safety</i>	.085	.083	.098	2.018	.010
Independent Variable: <i>Budgeting and Safety</i>					
Dependent Variable: <i>Buying behaviour</i>					

(Source: Field 2020)

The table presents the results that revealed the degree to which the variance in the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers is explained by COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. This is represented by R square which equals .068 and expressed in percentage is 6.8%. This shows that COVID-19 pandemic outbreak only accounts for 6.8% of the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers while the standard error estimate is .60906 which signifies error term. The table of ANOVA indicates that the importance of F is 7.369 at the point of significance of .000b..

The implication is that budgeting and safety of items during COVID-19 pandemic outbreak have significant influence on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers (Budgeting $\beta = .152$; $t=1.999$; $p<0.05$; Safety $\beta = .085$; $t=2.018$; $p<0.05$). Since the model's level of significance is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis should be dismissed while accepting the alternative hypothesis. It can therefore be concluded that COVID-19 pandemic outbreak significant effect on the buying behavior of online grocery shoppers.

4.3 Qualitative Findings

The section also includes thematic analysis from the semi-structured interview. Specifically, this aspect used themes as descriptor, concepts and component of ideas that are reoccurring when respondents gave their different opinions. It contains common trends or patterns discovered from the interviews conducted with the managers and supervisors in the selected grocery stores.

4.3.1 What are the strategies put in place by the grocery stores to satisfy the needs of the customers during COVID-19?

Not only are physical queues forming outside bricks and mortar stores globally, but we are also seeing virtual queues forming too. Online grocery stores are trying to handle the rising rates of online transactions due to the Covid-19 pandemic globally to put their customers first. The selection of respondents for the interview cut across

various demographic characteristics such as age, marital status, etc. To attempt to gain some control over the situation, some supervisors and managers have this to say:

In line with the above, a male manager further explained.

We stopped processing new customer accounts, opting only to accept orders from existing customers that have purchased from them before. The best thing one can do is to buy in moderation. Set the example for others.

To corroborate this, a married female manager had this to say:

We are not alone in dealing with these pressures and complaints but rectifying the problem quickly.

A male manager had this to say on Supporting Vulnerable Clients:

Older customers and those who have a genuine need of additional consideration, during this period are being offered specific opening hours both in the morning and evening.

It can be concluded that the selected grocery stores have strategies put in place to satisfy the needs of the customers during COVID-19. These include washing of hands by staff vigorously with soap and warm water for some seconds when they first arrive at work, application of social distancing, appointment of designated sanitation worker, etc. This suggests that the grocery stores have adopted and implemented policies that actively allow consumers to purchase online grocery stores and other products for home delivery or curbside pickup (where possible) or consult with their local grocery store to see whether there are pre-order or drive choices.

4.3.2 What are the preventive measures to put place by the grocery stores to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

Managers and supervisors of the selected grocery stores revealed some subtle and seemingly unusual lessons:

For instance, with sanitation and cleanliness valued by shoppers, the aroma of chlorine and bleach in the stores made them feel safe. Also, we have temporarily been forced to introduce reduced opening hours to facilitate increased cleaning and restocking of the shelves.

Another respondent has this to say:

Also noteworthy was enacting protocol that demonstrated we were doing all we could to protect our shoppers.” We ensure that workers and shoppers use a hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol before they enter and after their exit from the grocery store.

Another male supervisor also contributed. He opines

We are seeing the impact of the necessary government recommendations, including social distancing affecting our retail partners in both their offline and online environment. Fulfilment will be hugely impacted as home deliveries are increasing and capacity to fulfil these being stretched.

A female assistant director shared her experience during one of the IDIs:

We are seeing a considerable increase in online activity with shoppers making use of both web and mobile platforms with new downloads of apps rising quickly. This increase in online activity will put massive pressure on the existing technical infrastructures that we have in place. The outcome of this will be an investment in technology and platforms to ensure that demand can be met.

A male manager had this to say on social distancing:

We have restrictions to the number of people at any given time that can enter the store. These restrictions are in place to protect the customer and the staff, who have a higher chance of catching the virus due to being fixed in one location and continuously exposed to customers.

Another married male manager shared her experience on Cashless Transactions

There are several stores who during this period will not accept cash and will only accept card and preferably Contactless Payment options. We are also seeing employees sanitizing the keypads of the payment units between customers. Rather than taking the card off the customer and tapping it for them, employees are asking

customers to tap it themselves. Again, we continue to communicate with our employees to keep morale up regularly.

It can be affirmed that copious measures were put place by the grocery stores to prevent the spread of COVID-19. These include continued sanitation and cleanliness, home deliveries, reducing the amount of trips customers make to the store to minimize the risk of spreading the virus; disinfecting shopping carts, investment in technology, allowing customers to only touch food they will buy as it will stop the spread of germs on products other shoppers might touch; avoiding payment by cash where possible; wash of hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds etc. This suggests that the grocery stores have changed beyond imagination as they navigate lockdown and think about the 'new normal.'

4.3.3 How has the adoption of digital media helped to display the availability/accessibility of products in the grocery stores?

Supporting the finding above, a respondent during an In-depth-Interview (IDI) Session opined:

We keep posting on our website and on social media to keep clients up to date about our service delivery capability. We post lunch specials available for take-off or delivery or offers or promotions online. It helped us produce more revenue during this period of great difficulty.

Another female respondent said:

We already provide phone and email support to our customers, but now is the time to increase our customer service capabilities and make sure that our consumers can reach us wherever they may be. Social networking is a good starting point because Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and other instant messaging platforms give us the opportunity to chat. Besides, we provided video conferencing services via Skype or Zoom, so our customers can get a "face-to - face" experience.

Another manager also shared her experience:

We set up an inbound customer service number during this time. We engage our customers by setting up virtual meetings with electronic scheduling apps. We emphasized online customer contact and create user-friendly, time-saving online FAQs.

A male supervisor also had this to say:

By offering more products and services, we have deepened our customer relations strategy. We seek to support our customers ' favorite channels as much as possible (if they reach out through social media, if their channel choice is email, value and use that medium, respond to them via social media). Above all, we are opened and quick to respond to complaints from our customers regardless of their locations.

Speaking further on the above, a male manager said:

We help avoid wasted trips in the car and reduce frustration by providing timely and accurate information on our various social media platforms and websites. We try to provide customers with a valid working link, and confirmation if the item is in stock with the retailer or if they will need to call the store to verify. Furthermore, we provide a visible button to click, which will take the customer to that point of purchase online or in-store at the retailer of their choosing. This happens in the least amount of clicks possible for the exact items they are interested in purchasing.

4.3.4 What are the issues and strategies adopted by the grocery stores in managing customers' experience during this COVID-19 outbreak?

In a particular grocery stores are struggling with severe out-of-stock situations on several main items as customers hang up stocks that are necessary. Until now, the potential to predict and control demand has never been more important. The significant challenges the grocery stores are facing include:

Speaking further on the above, a male supervisor spoke on limiting purchases:

To restrict people stockpiling on essential items, which prevents others from having access to these items, we are limiting the sale of specific products to ensure fairer distribution.

A male manager had this to say on fulfilment

Home deliveries have increased, but we can expect to see an uplift in a click and collect too. We are seeing considerable delays in-home deliveries across the board, with customers having to wait up to a week for an available delivery slot. This will force customers to visit bricks and mortar stores if they cannot wait any longer for deliveries.

Supporting the finding above, a respondent emphasized on payments technology:

As payments move online rapidly, we can expect to see a considerable surge in in-app payments, further putting pressure on technology infrastructures for retailers.

Buttressing this point, a married female manager explained the attitude of workers in the grocery:

The pandemic put a unique strain on supermarkets in Dublin, which, in some cases, were the only businesses up and running yet were affected by massive levels of absenteeism among workers.

A female supervisor had this to say on Fear and Panic

As you can imagine, fear, doubt and panic among customers was widespread in the early days of the outbreak. Sharing information and educating our associates via Facebook, WhatsApp, twitter, significantly helped in boosting the morale of our customers.

COVID-19 massive disruption has left an indelible mark on customers. It has strengthened the need for consumers to exercise vigilance – on when, and how they make their purchases – usual habits have changed. The effect of this is enormous on retailers and grocery stores. Of course, we also know little about the COVID-19 virus and its long-term effects. Yet what is obvious is that the way people around the world

are thinking and behaving has already profoundly changed. Ireland, one of the countries to successfully move through at least one wave of the virus – provides some interesting insights into how consumers' preferences, desires, and aspirations could evolve in other markets in the months ahead. Customer demand has changed from discretionary items to those considered essential. Consumers have begun to prioritize health and supply chain protection over cost and convenience.

At the same time, online channels of certain brands – particularly those in the grocery and food industries – saw massive volume. Finally, this dissertation concludes that grocery stores without a customer-friendly digital presence scrambled to fill the gap. Apparently, the risk of infection is thought to be trivial from SARS-CoV-2, the virus that triggers COVID-19 from food items, food packaging, or bags. But following good food safety practices is always important. When customers order (if possible), managers and supervisors encourage them to pay online or by phone. More so, management of these stores allow deliveries whenever possible, without communication in person.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be inferred from the findings that hundreds of employees who were idle due to restaurant closure were temporarily employed by grocery operators to help meet the spikes in demand. Customers are clearly consuming large quantities of goods and making stores struggle to keep up. To sustain the demand, many grocers and retailers are limiting the quantity of items a customer can purchase. It is concluded that grocery stores have put measures in place to protect their employees as they work through this crisis, enable working from home where possible and being mindful of the impact this crisis is having on everyone.

This research argues that Coronavirus has modified the way people purchase food and view grocery stores online. The number of households using an online supermarket service has risen by 30 percent over the last month, and the increase over delivery is not equal to a decrease in real-life shopping. The opposite is true, in fact. The in-store shopping necessity remains, partly due to restricted online availability. For example, customers from all ages, but particularly those over the age of 50, have moved to digital and delivery, leading to a new, permanent food retail standard. This has created an atmosphere poised for innovation and with the need to realign supply chains, redefine what sections of the food workforce are important, and gain a deeper understanding of how to communicate through social media with loyal customers.

It was noted from the findings that part of a robust consumer buying behavior strategy involves the management of customer journeys. That is the practice of using behavioral trends and technology to minimize the efforts of customers across all channels and points of contact. Retailers should also be thinking about the impact these massive changes will have on the customer and the customer relationship. It is vital that retailers put measures in place to protect their employees as they work through this crisis, enable working from home where possible and being mindful of the impact this crisis is having on everyone. The global response to this virus has fundamentally changed the reality for owners of grocery stores. The reaction to an event like this has caused an upsurge in technology investments to support the growing pressure on retailers (grocery stores). Those retailers that prioritized investment in their infrastructure in the past will likely cope well with this increased demand.

There are many areas of the supermarket such as trolleys which have frequent usage from one customer to the next; This gives ample opportunities for COVID-19 to pass between people. Therefore, the local authority should consistently create some guidance for supermarkets to follow regarding good disinfection practice. To compliment this, the United Nations has urged employers across the globe to ensure that food retail workers obtain the protection and rights they deserve. Safe workers and healthy stores are of utmost importance because supermarkets are the most frequently visited locations during this pandemic. The risk of contagion rises without adequate health and security at the stores.

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APPENDIX I

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Respondent,

I am a master's student conducting a survey to learn about social media marketing and online consumer buying behavior during COVID-19 pandemic in Dublin. The goal of the survey is to understand how a pandemic like the novel coronavirus affects social media marketing and online grocery shopping consumers. This research is solely for academic purpose and thus, your response will be confidentially treated. Kindly select the response that is most applicable to you in each section of the questionnaire. **Thank you**

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF RESPONDENTS

Instruction: Kindly tick or fill where applicable.

1. Age: 15-25 (☐) 25-35 (☐) 35-45 (☐) 45-55 (☐) 55-65 (☐)
2. Gender: Male (☐) Female (☐)
3. Marital Status: Single (☐) Married (☐) Others (☐)
4. Educational Status:
5. Which of the Social Media Platform do you often use:

SECTION B

Instruction: Please tick which box appropriately describes you.

1. Around what time of the day do you check the social media?
6am – 12pm ☐ 1pm - 6pm ☐ 6pm – 12am ☐ 12am – 6am ☐
2. How many hours do you spend on social media platform daily?
Less than 1 ☐ 1-3 ☐ 4-6 ☐
3. How did you become aware of Grocery store page?
Friends ☐ Advert ☐ Google ☐ Others ☐
4. Do you follow Grocery store page on any of the media platform?
Yes ☐ No ☐

Section C

Please, indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 which number best describes your opinion.
For example, if you Strongly Disagree (SD), kindly tick 1, however if you Strongly Agree (SA), tick 5.

Covid-19 and Customers Buying Behavior						
S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD
Q1	My spending habits changed in the past few weeks	5	4	3	2	1
Q2	My buying behavior has changed since coronavirus epidemic began.	5	4	3	2	1
Q3	Attention about healthy aspects of food has increased since coronavirus epidemic began	5	4	3	2	1
Q4	I purchase more packaged foods now than before	5	4	3	2	1
Q5	The amount of packaged foods I have been buying hasn't changed since coronavirus epidemic began	5	4	<u>3</u>	2	1
Q6	The safety of packaged foods	5	4	3	2	1

								since the start of COVID-19 is satisfying																																																						
Q7								I have clear worries about food insecurity and grocery budgets since the start of COVID-19	5	4	3	2	1																																																	
<table><tr><th colspan="7">Covid-19 and Social Media Marketing</th></tr><tr><th>S/N</th><th>ITEMS</th><th>SA</th><th>A</th><th>U</th><th>D</th><th>SD</th></tr><tr><td>Q1</td><td>The lockdown has giving me the opportunity to take advantage of shopping online</td><td>5</td><td>4</td><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>1</td></tr><tr><td>Q2</td><td>During lock down, live chat tools are helpful in making enquiries</td><td>5</td><td>4</td><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>1</td></tr><tr><td>Q3</td><td>The pandemic has given me opportunity to sign up for offers online with my email address</td><td>5</td><td>4</td><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>1</td></tr><tr><td>Q4</td><td>Convenience plays a role in my decision to purchase online during Covid-19</td><td>5</td><td>4</td><td><u>3</u></td><td>2</td><td>1</td></tr><tr><td>Q5</td><td>Unattractive websites water-down my purchase drive</td><td>5</td><td>4</td><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>1</td></tr></table>								Covid-19 and Social Media Marketing							S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD	Q1	The lockdown has giving me the opportunity to take advantage of shopping online	5	4	3	2	1	Q2	During lock down, live chat tools are helpful in making enquiries	5	4	3	2	1	Q3	The pandemic has given me opportunity to sign up for offers online with my email address	5	4	3	2	1	Q4	Convenience plays a role in my decision to purchase online during Covid-19	5	4	<u>3</u>	2	1	Q5	Unattractive websites water-down my purchase drive	5	4	3	2	1	The amount of money I have spent on groceries is more than before Covid-19 began	5	4	3	2	1
								Covid-19 and Social Media Marketing																																																						
								S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD																																																
								Q1	The lockdown has giving me the opportunity to take advantage of shopping online	5	4	3	2	1																																																
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Q5	Unattractive websites water-down my purchase drive	5	4	3	2	1																																																								

Q6	An advert of a product has made me purchase the product	5	4	3	2	1						
Q7	Promos and discounts influence my choice to continuously purchase during Covid-19	5	4	3	2	1						
Q8	I have bought items I barely needed because of its attractive packaging during Covid-19	5	4	3	2	1						
Q9	Frequency of adverts pushes a product to the top of my mind during Covid-19	5	4	3	2	1						
Q10	I am a brand loyalist who remains unmoved by adverts of substitute products during Covid-19	5	4	3	2	1						
Q8												
Q9							There is confidence in the safety of the food supply in the grocery stores since the pandemic began	5	4	3	2	1
Q10							The ability for owners of	5	4	3	2	1

	grocery stores to meet consumer needs remains high					
--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Covid-19						
S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	U	D	SD
Q1	I reduced socializing with friends and family at home	5	4	3	2	1
Q2	During the pandemic, i spend all day using social media	5	4	3	2	1
Q3	I spend more time browsing social media	5	4	3	2	1
Q4	I have increased my browsing time during the period of Covid-19	5	4	<u>3</u>	2	1
Q5	I am sure I will contract the virus if I go to the grocery stores physically	5	4	3	2	1
Q6	I am practicing social distancing	5	4	3	2	1
Q7	I am engaged more in online shopping than in stores	5	4	3	2	1
Q8	I am worried about running out of money	5	4	3	2	1
Q9	I am concerned with running out of the basic necessities	5	4	<u>3</u>	2	1
Q10	I am experiencing anxiety from being confined to my house	5	4	3	2	1

Do you think adoption of online buying behaviors can help to curb the spread of this pandemic

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APPENDIX II
IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR MANAGERS/SUPERVISORS OF
GROCERY STORES

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND ONLINE CONSUMER BUYING
BEHAVIOUR DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN DUBLIN

I thank you very much for accepting to participate in this study. I want to crave your indulgence to record our session today. This will enable me to analyses this session for the purpose of generalizing the results.

There are few questions I would like to ask, and I will be happy if you can be as open as possible and be confident that your responses shall be kept confidential.

1. How would you describe the global pandemic COVID-19?
2. What are the strategies put in place by the grocery stores to satisfy the needs of the customers during COVID-19?
3. How would you rate your compliance to the preventive measures to stop the spread COVID-19?
4. How has the adoption of digital media helped to display the availability/accessibility of products in the grocery stores?
5. What are the issues and strategies adopted by the grocery stores in managing customers' experience during this COVID-19 outbreak?