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More Important Than Ever: Embracing Digital marketing to Survive COVID-19

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Abstract

Businesses are most susceptible to the effects of Covid-19. The implementation of social distancing makes people limit activities outside their home, consequently sales turnover decreases. Therefore, SMEs need to change the mindset in running business by using technology transformation. The usage of digital marketing has proven to be more practical than traditional marketing at many times. The Movement Control Order (MCO) implemented on 18 March 2020 in Malaysia due to the pandemic has put a halt to businesses, thus crippling the income of those business owners. This study aimed to study how companies or businesses handle this crisis and how they are utilizing digital marketing to their benefit. The usage of three main types of digital marketing was investigated on the performance of companies or businesses in Malaysia during this pandemic. A total of two hundred and thirty-one questionnaires were collected from employees and employers who are working or have working experience. Three hypotheses were developed for each type of digital marketing on the performance of companies or businesses. The findings showed that many companies are benefiting from the adaptation of digital marketing during this pandemic. Data were analyzed using SmartPLS and revealed that social media marketing, email marketing and mobile marketing are effective for businesses to survive during this pandemic.

Keywords: Digital marketing, Covid-19, business performance, business owner, Malaysia

1.0 Introduction

The spread out of coronavirus disease (COVID 19) has affected everyone around the world. This is for the first time in the history of mankind when more than 70% of countries which include developed, developing, and underdeveloped nations are under lockdown. It has already caused huge turmoil in the global economy. In the current era, due to technological advancement the marketing methods have changed tremendously. The introduction of online and digital marketing is the current trend where companies seek to exploit this situation. It is known that everyone has a smartphone nowadays and mostly everything can be found online. Coronavirus lockdown has halted many business processes starting from manufacturing, supply chain to logistics, and marketing.

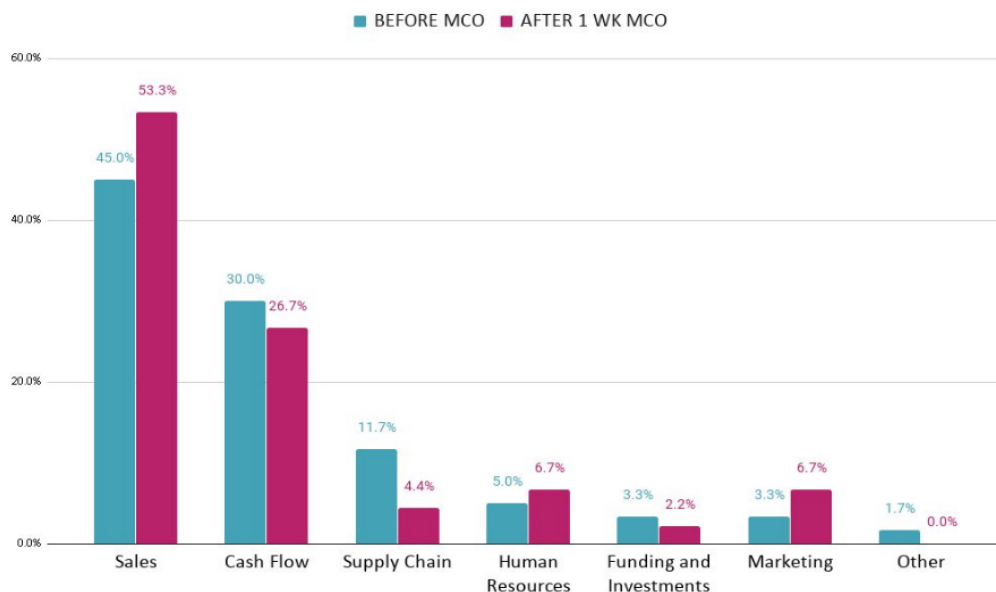


Figure 1: Areas of the business most impacted by COVID-19, before and after the movement control order came into effect on 18 March 2020
Source: Recommend.my

Figure 1 indicated that sales and cash flow as the main area affected by COVID-19 (Marie, 2020). Businesses have to find ways to create new opportunities. Staying afloat during COVID-19 entails new approaches. Hence, the introduction of digital marketing has encouraged companies all around the world to start advertising and promoting their products through online platforms as it is the most efficient way to reach a larger audience, especially during this pandemic. According to Smith (2017), 69% of consumers in the United States share information about products or services through online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. However, in context to the world population of internet users, Clement (2020), found that 59% of the global population are internet users. This shows that consumers nowadays are techno-savvy as most of their buying, sharing of information, and communication is done online. A research done by Omondi (2017), classified digital marketing into six different types of marketing platforms. Those marketing platforms are email marketing, mobile marketing, social media

marketing, online advertising, search engine optimization, and pay-per-click. These six marketing platforms are commonly used by marketers to communicate and share their products or services with their consumers. Email marketing represents the information sharing of a product or service through emails where marketers utilize this method to share information on the new updates they have. For example, new promotions and introduction of new products are commonly shared via email to the consumers. Besides that, mobile marketing is somewhat similar to email marketing, but it is done through text messages. A common example of this can be seen when we receive new promotions from Pizza Hut or Dominos through text messages. Moreover, according to Shirisha (2018), Social media marketing is one of the most popular methods used by marketers where they utilize the usage of online platforms such as Instagram and so on. Lastly, pay per click refers to the advertisements that are found on the web browsers where companies get paid every time a customer clicks their advertisement.

Even though almost everything is available online, the importance of a physical store is always there where consumers like to take their time deciding what to buy. For example, clothing is available online but there has always been clothing stores in shopping malls and so on. On the other hand, it was stated that the Hotel Industry is also one of the main sectors where they are facing a decrease in bookings (Dong, 2020). The author also stated that hotels should manage their pricing strategy and plan to attract customers when things start to get better. During this pandemic, companies and businesses are struggling to generate income and attract more customers. This can be seen especially for brick-and-mortar companies where they solely depend on their physical store.

This study aims to investigate how companies or businesses in Malaysia sustain their marketing strategies and their action plan for the future especially during this pandemic. In this research, three types of digital marketing are investigated which are email marketing, mobile marketing, and social media marketing as these three are among platforms proven to have a positive impact towards the growth of businesses by Omondi (2017). These three types of digital marketing are also commonly used by companies or businesses which will provide more proof on their impact. Finally, this study is conducted to investigate the relationship or impact of digital marketing on the companies or businesses sales performance.

2.0 Literature review

According to Onyango (2016), performance is evaluated in financial and non-financial terms where it shows evidence that the objectives are met. Performance can be measured in various ways and is not limited. Usually, a company or business is evaluated based on their financial turnover where the more income they make the more successful they are. On the other hand, the performance of a company can also be measured non-financially where they consider the reputation, social image, and customers' satisfaction. This was also backed up by a study conducted by Strauss and Frost (2014), where it was cited by Wisdom (2015) that the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) can be determined online and offline. Online indicates the social media presence whereas the offline

indicates the customer satisfaction.

A research conducted by Bang and Hell (2015) studied the competitive position of companies where networking, social media, brand awareness, and competitive advantage were considered important aspects. The study showed that a company's performance can be evaluated by different aspects and not only financially. Another research conducted by Omondi (2017), emphasized on the sales generated by digital marketing where the performance of companies was only measured according to their sales generated.

A study conducted by Castronovo and Huang (2012), stated that email marketing is very cost efficient where it can build customer relationships. Email marketing also provides a medium where customers can have a one-on-one communication with the company or business if they have any enquiries or doubts. In conclusion, email marketing is quite beneficial as it has been practiced worldwide and will be further investigated in this research to witness the impact it has on companies and businesses in Malaysia. According to Narang and Shankar (2019), mobile marketing is very important for managers where they seek to attract more consumers. It is important that companies and businesses focus on making it easier for consumers to receive messages related to a product or service. In that case, mobile marketing provides an opportunity to meet those criteria.

Moreover, it is a known fact that consumers nowadays prefer things to be done online and more convenient. In context to that, mobile marketing is a suitable platform to achieve that. It was stated by Holland (2010) that mobile marketing does help marketers build trust amongst the consumers and is widely being accepted by consumers. In conclusion, mobile marketing has a similar function to email marketing where they also have the same functions and will be further studied in this research to see the impact it has on companies or businesses in Malaysia.

Social media is a wide platform where it connects the people worldwide. The boundaries of communication are limitless as people are able to communicate with one another across different countries no matter how far they are. According to research done by Nadaraja and Yazdanifard (2013), there are certain advantages of social media marketing. Firstly, the information that can be shared to consumers is not limited and can provide for a two-way communication. Secondly, customers can request for customization of products or services and share their feedback with companies or businesses. This allows for better services that companies can provide and they can have a better understanding of their consumers' preferences. In the business world, consumers' needs and wants are supposed to be the top priority of companies or businesses as they are the key success factors for them. In conclusion, social media marketing looks to be a crucial platform for marketers and will be investigated further on in this research to see the impact it has towards companies or businesses in Malaysia.

From previous studies, digital marketing (independent variable) is a crucial factor to determine the performance of a company (dependent variable) in terms of monetary and non-monetary terms. However, there are a few forms of digital marketing in the current era such as email marketing, mobile marketing and social media marketing.

2.1 Hypothesis Development

2.1.1 The relationship between email marketing and the sales performance of companies or businesses in Malaysia during the pandemic

According to a study conducted by Fariborzi and Zahedifard (2012), they found that email marketing has many advantages where it is easy and efficient as it can be sent to many consumers. Another good thing about email marketing is that it can be tracked in terms of number of opened emails and click rate. This provides an opportunity for companies to track their emails and measure how effective they are. Besides that, Hudak, Kianickova, and Madlenak (2017) concluded that the status of email marketing has changed to become one of the most effective ways of marketing as it builds the brand identity, gets more contacts, strengthens customer relationships, and helps spread news on sales promotions. Mirzaei et al (2012) clarified that email marketing is not something that is complex and it also helps to increase the sales and make recurrent sales from the same individual. This shows that in past research, email marketing has been one of the most efficient ways of marketing and is commonly used by many companies. Eid, Riyad and El-Gohary (2011) also revealed that e-marketing has a positive influence on small business enterprises' pre-sales activities, after sales activities, marketing performance and marketing effectiveness. Therefore leads to an increase in sales. Thus, it is proposed that:

H1: There is a significant relationship between email marketing and sales performance.

2.1.2 The relationship between mobile marketing and the sales performance of companies or businesses in Malaysia during this pandemic

Based on a study conducted by Oztas (2015), mobile marketing has become the latest marketing tool after internet marketing as almost everyone possesses a phone. It was also concluded by the researcher that mobile marketing contributes towards a better communication towards consumers and businesses. Another study which was done by Strom, Vendel, and Bredican (2014) indicated that mobile marketing was useful for retailers in terms of their sales driven communication, increased loyalty of customers as there is better communication, and enhances shopping experience as customers can communicate their feedback. These past researches showed that mobile marketing is indeed beneficial for companies in many ways. In terms of the sales performance of companies or businesses, it is believed that mobile marketing can provide a boost. This can be seen in a study conducted by Goodwin et al (2014) where mobile apps/mobile marketing proves to be a crucial factor for small business revenues. The study concluded that 53% of their respondents agreed that mobile marketing has increased their sales. Another study conducted by Ibrahim et al (2014) where they investigated the impact of smartphone applications for online businesses. It was concluded that the usage of smartphones not only raised the brand awareness, helped build relationships and grew the business but also contributed to a strategic

profit gain. This shows the impact that mobile marketing has towards the sales performance of companies and businesses. Thus, it is proposed that:

H2: There is a significant relationship between mobile marketing and sales performance.

2.1.3 The relationship between social media marketing and the sales performance of companies or businesses in Malaysia during this pandemic.

According to Aman (n.d.), a study was conducted where social media marketing was being investigated to find out the impact it has on business performance and concluded that that the usage of social media does enhance the capabilities of businesses and in turn improves the business performance. Bortolato (2016) findings showed social media marketing tools managed to improve the sales performance when this tool was being adopted. Another findings from Rodrigues, Peterson and Ajjan (2016) showed that social media marketing had a positive effect on customers and it led to an increase of sales performances. Besides, Singh and Sinha (2017) found that social media marketing is able to reach a larger audience of consumers and target the specific needs with ease. The research also concluded that there is a positive relationship between social media marketing on the growth and performance of businesses in India. This shows that social media marketing is a very useful tool for marketing and should be utilized. Thus, it is proposed that:

H3: There is a significant relationship between social media marketing and sales performance.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey method. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the degree of agreeableness among the respondents (e.g., 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Items of each variable were modified to adjust for the current study. Email marketing, mobile marketing and social media marketing were measured using four (4) items. All items were adopted from Omondi (2017). Four (4) items were used to measure sales performance from Omondi (2017) too.

Primary data for this study were collected by applying a convenience sampling and judgmental sampling. Managers and business owners were selected based on their availability and willingness as it was more convenient to find participants who were willing to take part rather than forcing them. Judgment sampling was also being exploited in this research as it served as a benchmark when choosing the respondents to participate. It saved time as only Malaysians who were employed will be targeted. Google forms were used as it was easy to administer, lower cost, faster data collection and easy to eliminate missing data in survey responses (Hair et al., 2016). Thus, a total of 231 final samples were collected for data analysis using SmartPLS 3. A two-

stage approach was performed (algorithm and bootstrapping) and reporting is based on the measurement model to confirm the validity and reliability of the data.

4.0 Data Analysis

To analyze the demographic profile SPSS Version 26 was hired, to validate the prediction of the model, this study used Smart PLS 3. **Table 1: Respondent's profile**

	Number (N= 231)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	129	55.8
Female	102	44.2
Age		
18-25 years old	116	50.2
26-35 years old	65	28.1
36-45 years old	36	15.6
Above 45 years old	14	6.1
Types of Business		
Sole Proprietor	29	12.55
Partnership	38	16.45
Corporation	164	71.0
Annual turnover before adapting digital marketing		
Less than RM500,000	92	39.83
RM500,001-RM999,999	76	32.90
RM1,000,000 – RM4,999,999	29	12.55
Above RM5 million	34	14.72
Annual turnover after adapting digital marketing		
Less than RM500,000	37	16.02
RM500,001-RM999,999	90	38.96
RM1,000,000 – RM4,999,999	52	22.51
Above RM5 million	52	22.51
Years of establishment		
Less than a year	8	3.46
1 year – 3 year	20	8.66
3 years- 7 years	60	25.97
More than 7 years	143	61.91

Source: Developed for this study

Table 1 showed the general profile of the respondents which includes 129 male and 109 female. Half of the respondents are aged between 18-25 years old. Majority of the respondents are working in a corporation followed by partnership and sole proprietorship. Most of the businesses have been in operation for more than 7 years (143

respondents) while the rest (88 respondents) are lesser. The largest reported annual income before and after digital marketing adoption is less than RM500, 000 (39.83%) and RM500, 000 to RM999, 999 (38.96%) with respondents of 92 and 90 respectively.

Table 2: Result of Measurement Model

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Outer Loading	CR	AVE
Email marketing	EM1	3.72	0.017	0.893	0.951	0.829
	EM2	3.72	0.010	0.941		
	EM3	3.68	0.015	0.914		
	EM4	3.70	0.018	0.894		
Mobile marketing	MM1	3.37	0.024	0.853	0.923	0.749
	MM2	3.54	0.015	0.889		
	MM3	3.43	0.022	0.872		
	MM4	3.63	0.026	0.847		
Sales performance	SP1	3.79	0.020	0.889	0.888	0.665
	SP2	3.94	0.014	0.934		
	SP3	3.90	0.016	0.919		
	SP4	3.87	0.018	0.902		
Social media marketing	SMM1	3.70	0.041	0.761	0.951	0.830
	SMM2	3.52	0.038	0.756		
	SMM3	3.81	0.015	0.886		
	SMM4	3.89	0.025	0.850		

Source: Developed for this study

Construct reliability assesses the degree to which items are free from random error and, therefore, yield consistent results. This study calculated reliability of measures using the composite reliability (CR) index and the average variance extracted (AVE) index. Table 2 showed AVE values for every construct exceeded 0.5, this shown convergent validity is achieved. The table also indicated all the factor loadings are above 0.7 and composite reliability exceeds 0.7 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Thus, the reliability of the constructs is all considered to be good and acceptable (Hair et al., 2016).

TABLE 3: Discriminant validity (Fornell-larcker Criterion)

Source: Developed for this study

Construct	Email marketing	Mobile marketing	Sales performance	Social media marketing
Email marketing	0.911			
Mobile marketing	0.547	0.865		

Sales performance	0.709	0.736	0.815	
Social media marketing	0.571	0.658	0.802	0.91

Table 3 showed that the Discriminant validity (Fornell-larcker Criterion) is achieved since the values in bold which represent the square root of AVE are higher than all the values in its rows and columns. The rest of the values show the correlation between the constructs with other constructs within the conceptual model.

TABLE 4: Discriminant validity (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT))

Construct	Email marketing	Mobile marketing	Sales performance	Social media marketing
Email marketing				
Mobile marketing	0.598			
Sales performance	0.809	0.859		
Social media marketing	0.612	0.720	0.897	

A HTMT value that exceeds 0.90 represents an issue of discriminant validity. As shown in Table 4, all HTMT values of the construct were below 0.90. These tests suggested that discriminant validity was not a serious problem in our study. The Discriminant validity (Fornell-larcker Criterion and Heterotrait Monotrait Ratio) were analyzed using the Smart_PLS 3.2.8 software (Ringle et al., 2015).

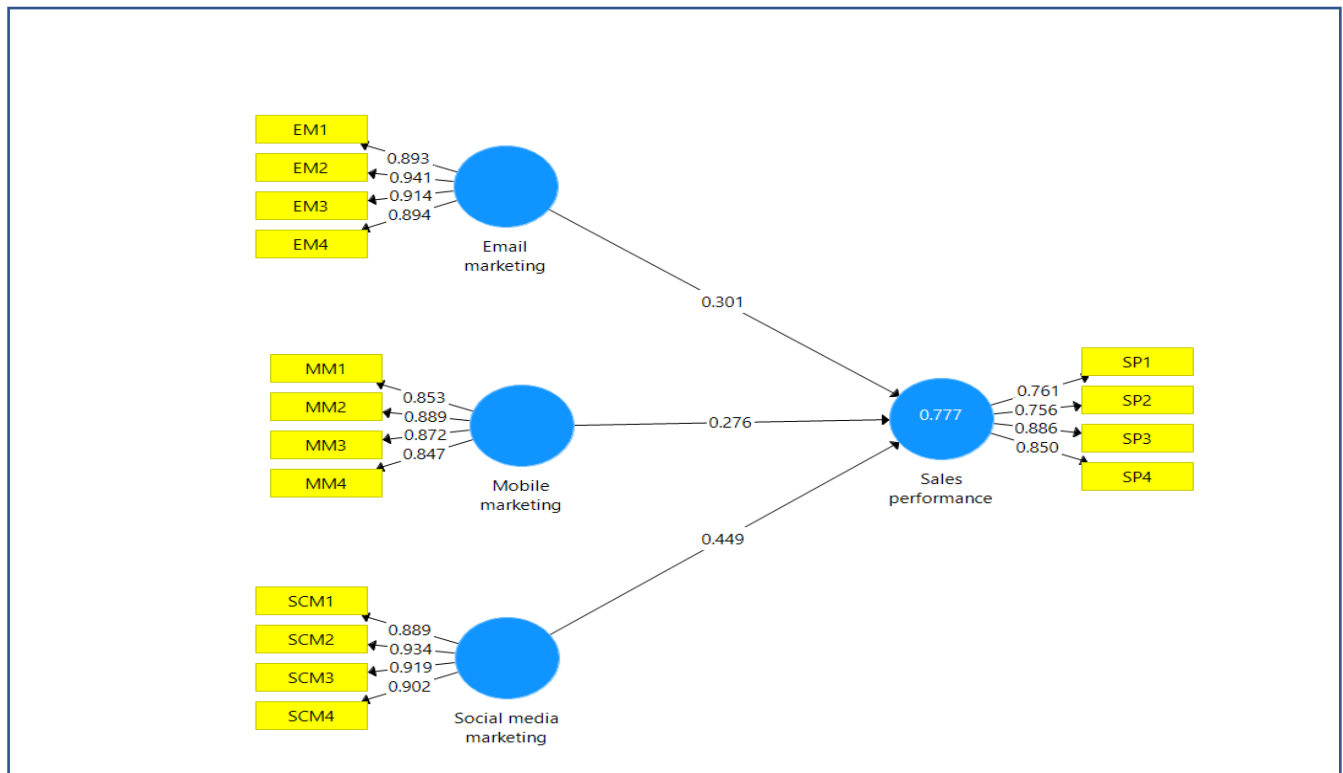


Figure 1: Structural Model
Source: Developed for this study

The model above was presented with a direct path of email marketing, mobile marketing, and social media marketing towards sales performance. All variables showed that are significant at the p-value, 0.000 and the path coefficient of 0.301, 0.276 and 0.449 respectively. No indirect effect was hypothesized. Social media marketing contributed the highest with 0.449 to the relationship with sales performance.

TABLE 5: Path coefficient for hypothesis testing

Paths	Coefficient	t-value	R-square	VIF	Decision
H1: EM → SP	0.301	5.352**	0.777	1.608	Supported
H2: MM → SP	0.276	5.100**		1.908	Supported
H3: SMM → SP	0.449	9.794**		1.987	Supported

** -p value < 0.01

Note: EM- email marketing, MM- mobile marketing, SMM-social media marketing. SP- sales performance

Table 5 indicated that email marketing (p=0.000), mobile marketing (p=0.000) and social media marketing (p=0.00) are affecting sales performance. R-square of 77.7% was achieved, and it showed a good model fit where 77.7% of this model can be determined by email marketing, mobile marketing and social media marketing. The

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was examined to identify multicollinearity issues. Table 5 shows that multicollinearity is not an issue among the exogenous latent constructs, since all VIF values were below 5. Thus, multicollinearity is not a threat in this study.

Hypothesis testing	Decision
H1: There is a significant relationship between email marketing and sales performance.	Supported
H2: There is a significant relationship between mobile marketing and sales performance.	Supported
H3: There is a significant relationship between social media marketing and sales performance.	Supported

5.0 Discussion and findings

The results for Hypothesis 1 revealed the anticipated positive relationship between email marketing and sales performance. It showed that the presence of email marketing played an important role in companies' performance. This signifies that the greater the extent usage of email marketing, the better the performance of companies or businesses during the pandemic. This can be further solidified as Hudak, Kianickova, and Madlenak (2017) stated that email marketing was once deemed as not trustworthy, but in the current era is one of the most effective marketing activities to help boost the performance of companies or businesses.

The second hypothesis examined the relationship between mobile marketing and companies' sales performance, whereby a positive relationship was postulated. The results unsurprisingly revealed that the hypothesis was supported. In this research, it was found that mobile marketing is also positively associated with each performance factor. It also indicates that the greater the extent of usage of mobile marketing, the performance of companies or businesses during the pandemic will be even better. This can be justified as Strom, Vendel, and Bredican (2014) stated that mobile marketing is important for a business to grow in terms of their customers, sales, and competitive advantage.

Hypotheses 3 were poised to examine the relationship between social media marketing and the companies' sales performance. It was shown that social media marketing is positively associated with the performance of companies or businesses in Malaysia during this pandemic. It was also shown that the greater the extent of the usage, the better the performance of the company or business. According to Singh and Sinha (2017), social media marketing is a key tool in doing business nowadays. This justifies that social media is an important factor on the performance factors of companies or businesses.

Digital marketing has grown rapidly. Advances in information technology have changed many aspects of business, marketing activities, and gave birth to online transaction methods. Digital marketing has grown rapidly. Developments in information technology have changed many aspects of business, marketing

activities, and gave birth to online transaction methods. During the COVID-19, businesses have transformed transactions through digital marketing. At the time where the pandemic has accelerated, the growth of digital marketing has gradually taken an impact on changing consumer behaviour towards online transactions.

Research regarding Covid-19 in the context of digital marketing is currently almost non-existent, due to the Covid-19 situation being so current, and therefore, this study contributes to the previously unstudied area. The suggested future research that may contribute to filling the research gap even more are to investigate how online business owners from different countries are affected by Covid-19 and how they deal with it. Also, to study the aftermath of Covid-19 in relation to businesses and how they have been affected through the whole process/situation which will give another perspective than the studies that will most likely emerge during the beginning of Covid-19. Researchers also should consider all types of digital marketing such as pay-per-click, influencer marketing, search-engine optimization, and so on to evaluate the best choice which will have the best outcome in terms of the performance evaluation. Other types of marketing such as direct marketing, radio marketing, and so on can be examined when the pandemic is over. This will provide a clearer picture on which type of marketing will best suit the company or businesses at that given time. Although it is too early to comment upon how this crisis shapes in future, one thing is sure that e-marketing will prove to be an effective way of managing this crisis.

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