

Ethan Saks

Angie Chuang

JRNL 4920 - 901

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# **Brand Success Amid COVID-19**

## **Intro**

When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, fear and governmental oversight drove citizens into their homes, and businesses nationwide were forced to close because of social distancing regulations. Corporations had no choice but to find innovative ways to survive the crisis without knowing when things would return to normalcy. Thus, businesses were shut down overnight. To maintain safety, the government increased the distance among citizens, regardless of contact with COVID-19, to reduce the virus's likelihood of spreading. Although the movement helped diminish sickness and death amongst the population, social distancing negatively impacted the economy because consumers had to find new methods to engage with their favorite brands. Companies had to find ways to attract consumers as physical shopping became inaccessible.

Despite the dramatic change in consumer decision-making due to the impact of COVID-19, from March 2020 - August 2022, brands and agencies found ways to thrive by employing digital advertising strategies to increase brand awareness and engagement via persuasive messages across various media platforms. In this essay, I will analyze brands during and after COVID-19 to determine how businesses remain relevant, particularly as new regulations influence innovative business-to-consumer advertising methods to best communicate with the target audience. I will explain why consumers are drawn to companies that align their business models and brand messaging with cultural expectations.

## **Lit Review:**

### **Impacts of COVID-19**

Human connection, such as specific forms of communication within the digital realm, has changed since the start of COVID-19. With new legislation and a rise in illness, the average lifestyle altered from a physically connected world to a digital one. Thus, consumers face many challenges when communicating with one another. “Participants reported challenges, barriers, and changes made while working through the best ways to communicate with priority populations during the pandemic” (Bishop et al., 2021). Consumers and companies had to use new technologies to communicate and deliver messages. With new communication methods, brands had to adapt quickly to these platforms to engage with buyers. During and after COVID-19, companies fought to remain relevant because brands innovated their advertising methods to best communicate with consumers.

Social distancing caused a paradigm shift within the advertising industry. “The third significant change the pandemic has accelerated is the increased use of technology, telework, and automation” (Gangadharbatla, 2021). The pandemic was not fully responsible for all changes in consumer behavior, yet it undoubtedly accelerated the change rate in other advertising fields due to the fluctuating environment.

Successful companies capitalize on new government ordinances and social distance regulations to increase audience awareness and consumer engagement in how agencies handle things.

“Successful brands align with cultural expectations and beyond” (El Refae et al., 2022). As regulations changed, so did consumer behavior; brands had to communicate that they sided with government regulations to attract consumers concerned.

One way brands advanced their advertisements was by employing social media advertising. It is important to note there are many dangers associated with social media; disinformation spread about COVID-19 and the pandemic, inevitably impacting the health and safety of the public. The digital sphere amplified users’ reach, giving the average person a larger voice than usual. Now, someone can spread their message regardless if backed in truth. As a result, users of the digital world are responsible for sorting through both truthful and false information, giving them a great deal of stress. Excessive use of social networking sites was associated with increased psychological issues, such as stress and anxiety (Robinson, Lawrence & Smith, 2022). However, amid the pandemic, it was believed that mobile apps and online platforms gave people a place to cope during social isolation and other COVID-19-related challenges.

Consumers purchase more household technology items to keep up as new technology developments continue to rise. “As the country reopens, consumers will continue to turn to new tech and digital services to enhance their more remote lifestyle” (Lo, 2021). The increased technology adoption continues to be a paradigm shift amid COVID-19, providing consumers with their simple wants and needs. An increase in the adoption of technology has broadened consumer communication horizons, especially as clients use new software and apps like social

media to enhance their brand image and run their businesses. The rise in technological developments has amplified the most successful brands much more than the business, which did not keep up with the times.

The pandemic impacted almost every aspect of consumers' lives, motivating them to change their priorities and behaviors. "Technology has been at the forefront of consumers' responses to pandemic conditions, whether using technology to work from home, stay in touch with friends or keep entertained at home. COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of new digital behaviors like curbside pickup and video chatting. Consumers will continue integrating new tech and services that offer value and convenience in a post-pandemic landscape" (Lo, 2021). About four in ten consumers believe they have become addicted to or more reliant on technology.

Countries had to adapt to consumers entering the digital world like their corporate counterparts. Countries all across the world had to adapt as COVID-19 spread through the world like wildfire. "The Indian marketing industry underwent a complete make-over during the new Covid era. We learned the new culture of work from home, online teams to meet, and the growth of the digital marketing industry gave birth to a refined new hybrid model of marketing that brands adapted to for a smooth ROI driven transition" (Asian News International). The corporate structure of work life changed from working in-person from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM to working solely from home via online communications vehicles, such as Zoom.

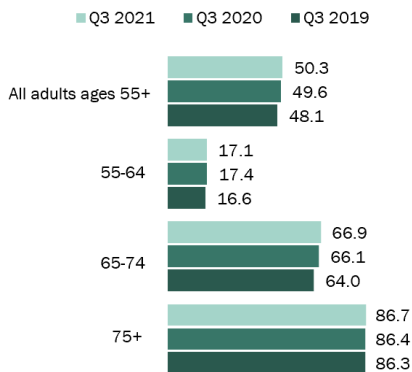
The vacation industry also adapted its messaging amid and after COVID-19. After social distancing regulations ended, companies and countries used specific marketing massaging to

recover and rebuild their brand image. “By nature, people working in this function are storytellers, and they should have no shortage of material here. We have the talent to shout about, brilliant innovations to share, and so much potential to harness" (Belfast Telegraph). Marketing professionals, directly or indirectly, play a significant role in shaping a country's reputation as a whole. Psychology across the world, as a collective, has changed. Understanding how digital entities impact psychological impacts will boost a brand’s success, as businesses could capitalize on ideological shifts.

According to a report from Pew Research Center, “unlike in other recent recessions, the pandemic has increased retirement among older adults” (Fry, 2021). With the older generation retiring quickly, the pandemic altered Millennial-employee priorities.

**Half of older U.S. adults are now retired**

*% of older adults who are retired*



Note: “Retired” refers to those not in the labor force due to retirement.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of July, August and September Current Population Survey monthly files (IPUMS).

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From learning new skills, self-care, and saving money, Millennials are beginning to value personal well-being and promote self-care. “In lockstep with these motions, a general changing

of the guard started taking place amongst the ranks as many millennials began to take on higher levels of decision-making leadership positions within prominent, high-growth tech companies” (Fromm, 2022). As they matured, Millennials started to occupy higher positions. They had a different view of advertising than their predecessors. A mass exodus of workers due to burnout and other variables, such as vaccine mandates, child care crisis, and unemployment insurance, coerced employers of corporations to fill jobs with new and inexperienced workers (Dill, 2021)

### **Digital Marketing Strategies**

Investigators have discovered that successful brands took advantage of the COVID-19 situation and quickly adapted by employing specific digital media tactics; intelligently, they targeted almost every person with access to the internet. “Communication strategy top companies should also consider targeting all gender, younger age groups, and those with or without education” (Thompson et al., 2020). Contact with consumers has significantly switched from physical attractions like billboards and out-of-home advertising to almost strictly on digital platforms. The most successful companies amid COVID-19 targeted all online users. “During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital marketing has hit its growth charts and has made technological advances all over the world. Digital marketing in hospitals during this pandemic is a marketing strategy that has many benefits, including attracting new patients, expanding business, increasing customer/patient trust, strengthening customer/patient loyalty, increasing brand awareness, encouraging patients to use hospital services, and promoting the services to patients' relatives

and family” (Pasaribu et al., 2022). From services such as Zoom to McDonald’s to different hospitals, digital marketing helped grow and support different organizations amid COVID-19.

Digital marketing impacts brand awareness, trust, and consumer attitude. “Furthermore, participants believe that digital marketing improves their trust if the virtual event is honest, rewarding, and has value. Finally, digital marketing has a great impact on participants’ willingness to attend the virtual event” (Jaafar et al., 2022). Consumers spend substantial time interacting with the digital world in self-isolation mode, so businesses must find ways to enhance their digital footprint.

Social distancing regulations influenced brands to create new digital content and strategies. “Given the increasing investment in branding within social media and the fragmentation of brand communications across multiple communications platforms, the management of effective brand communications remains a significant challenge” (Bowden et al., 2021). Social media’s rise in popularity has encouraged brands to switch their main ways of communication and place of marketing.

More than ever before, consumers are targeted online rather than in-person. Marketers have not only advertised on social media-based platforms but on messaging apps as well. “The four most popular messaging apps already have more monthly active users than the four major social networks. According to a recent estimate, 12.1% of mobile users in the U.S. use WhatsApp, and 56.8% use Facebook Messenger” (Optiz, 2022). Marketers now not only have to focus their



digital marketing efforts on public spaces such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest; instead, they allocate their resources towards effective advertising on messaging apps such as Skype, Messenger, WhatsApp, and email.

Paid social media is extremely effective when targeting specific audiences. Recent algorithmic changes have increased the ability to persuade and influence consumers, but not all companies have bought into the new paid social media ideology. “Despite paid social media’s effectiveness, 13% of respondents say their company does not devote resources to paid social media, and 36% say they don’t plan to start in the future” (PR Newswire, 2016). Leaders in the industry identify and agree that failing to prioritize social media is a poor decision for businesses.

Brands enhanced their marketing tactics by advertising purely on their website to using all multiple social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and LinkedIn. Social media marketers proclaim that their efforts are more effective for businesses than the other strategies used with an organic approach. “Every company is suited for a paid social media strategy. If you are not using paid tactics, then your social media presence will most likely be ineffective” (PR Newswire, 2016). New tracking software provides hard evidence that social media significantly increases a company’s likelihood of success. Reports show “77% of Millennials report making a purchase either online or in-store after seeing a product on Facebook” (Ouellette, 2022).

## **Adapting to Government Regulations and Social Distancing**

People did not know how to approach online communication at the pandemic's start. Established platforms such as Facetime and Skype were useful because these companies had existing consumers who had used the platform before. However, these methods of delivery could have been better for large audiences. Zoom, another video-based platform founded by Eric Yuan, the former vice president of Cisco Webex, rose to popularity during the COVID-19 crisis over these other platforms. Zoom was difficult to navigate initially, and the engineers needed to prepare to adapt to the huge increase of users using their platform, causing the website to crash on several occasions. After learning how to adapt to support an influx of new users by building additional tools, Zoom took off. "Zoom grew more rapidly than its much larger competition because it made things easy to change one's background... maximum simplicity, minimum effort. But, in striving to make onboarding a user simple, Zoom skipped some security precautions" (Dooley, 2022).

In addition, Zoom was highly successful during the pandemic, as its profits proved its success. "Zoom's valuation exceeded \$100 billion during the pandemic, a 383% increase on its value in January 2020" (Iqabl, 2023). Although not a perfect medium, Zoom provided students and employees with easy access and an efficient way to speak with one another via the Internet. Reports show that Zoom strategically advertised to businesses and enterprises. "Businesses, enterprises, and companies have always been Zoom's primary target audience. The Zoom platform was initially built mainly for enterprise customers - ranging from large financial service

corporations, universities, government agencies, healthcare, and IT companies” (Sivakumar, 2021).

Successful companies capitalize on new government ordinances and social distance regulations to increase audience awareness and consumer engagement. “For Peloton, the pandemic has been profitable. The at-home fitness company announced its first-ever quarterly profit, which was bolstered by a 172% surge in sales and more than 1 million people subscribing to its streaming classes” (Valinsky, 2022). Customers are home-bound because of new regulations and social distancing. Also, the closure of gyms during the lockdown and the inconveniences of masking while working out upon reopening made home workouts more appealing. As a result of these restrictions, many of them stocked up on Peloton’s stationary bikes and treadmills.

Similarly to Zoom, Peloton succeeded and took advantage of the shifting dynamic introduced during pandemic lockdowns. As a result of social distancing, instructors had to teach out of their houses rather than in person. Peloton could adapt more easily than a gym, as gym locations were forced to close nationwide. “As of January 1, 2022, a total of 30% of studios closed, an 11% increase from the previous year” (Smith, 2022). Furthermore, “tens of thousands of facilities have permanently closed, and thousands are still climbing out of the hole without the same access to the relief provided to other industries” (Smith, 2022).

Although gyms shut down, there continued to be a surge of consumers interested in working out and staying in shape during the lockdown. The pandemic provided the perfect setting for

expansion, as holdouts who remained committed to in-person classes could no longer head to gyms and fitness studios. At the end of June 2020, Peloton had 1.09 million subscribers, 113 percent over the previous year, with people paying \$39 monthly for the sessions they could engage with on their bike and treadmill screens (Lamber, 2022). Peloton advertised to keep up with their popularity: "Other media investments include Facebook ads, retargeting, search engine marketing, email marketing, TV, and print. The company spent over \$100 million on paid media in the last year, advertising on over 250 different media properties across multiple media formats" (Hein, 2022).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported, "By spring of 2021, the association had settled on a number: 90,000 closed restaurants, both temporary and permanent, which includes diners, cafes, chain outlets, taverns, bars, and neighborhood restaurants" (Carman, 2022). Consumers were not left with many choices because they could not go into a restaurant; many ordered food via a third-party platform, such as DoorDash. "The company implemented a number of measures to help its delivery drivers and restaurants struggling with the pandemic. For example, eligible delivery drivers in the U.S., Australia, Canada and Puerto Rico who are quarantined or diagnosed with COVID-19 are receiving up to two weeks of financial assistance. The company waived or reduced commission fees for local restaurants and added more than 100,000 independent eateries to its subscription program for free to generate sales" (Lucas, 2020). DoorDash adapted to both governmental and social expectations by having a business model that aligns with no contact between humans. This business model enabled DoorDash to be positioned as a corporation that aligns with social responsibility, making consumers more attracted than before.

New findings suggest that brands heavily invest in content marketing and digital communication channels. Yet, most still need to understand its effectiveness concerning consumer engagement fully. “Self-brand connection (SBC) was found to strongly drive behavioral, cognitive, affective, and social engagement. The cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement was found to mediate the self-brand connection and consumer loyalty relationships” (Bowden et al., 2021). It remains a large challenge to manage effective brand communication. Still, companies create sustainable consumer engagement by investing in scaling all dimensions of content marketing across multiple social media platforms.

There was a large shift in consumer behavior from before to after the pandemic lockdowns. Not all industries were equally equipped to take on the crisis. A report shows, “Pre-pandemic, around 30% of people shopped online for groceries (and even at that level, there were cracks starting in the supply chain: grocery stores that failed to track changing customer purchase patterns led to shortages or even mass food spoilage). During the pandemic, 80% shopped online. As the pandemic subsides, we anticipate the numbers will settle out a “new normal” above what we saw pre-pandemic” (Johnson, 2021). As the pandemic continued and sickness worsened, there was a lot of stress on companies to meet customer expectations. Consumers expect that brands they interact with are purposefully doing all they can to counteract the spread of COVID-19. Businesses had to comply with the “new normal” of working around social distancing regulations.

### **Aligning Brand Messaging with Cultural Expectations**

The most successful brands used social listening to their advantage as they aligned the company's missions with cultural expectations. “Brands were uncertain about communication, and most interacted with organizations aligning new cultural experiences” (Morris, N., 2009). Businesses that refused to shut down were often associated with businesses refusing to change as anti-government, and those brands struggled to thrive. As a result, brands adjust their messaging as consumers interact with the organizations aligning new cultural experiences. Advertising Perceptions reported, “49% of brands have postponed campaigns, and 34% have canceled them completely. The disconnect here is that with people stuck at home, there’s a significant increase in the use of streaming services and media consumption through mobile phones” (Rewire, 2023). Brands had to promote their idea of positive social distancing. Companies wanted to show their audience that they support the government and social distancing regulations. For example, “McDonald's, Zara, Volkswagen, and Coca-Cola have all given their own visual take on social distancing by altering or animating their logos to depict distance” (Rewire, 2023).



Normal McDonald's Advertisement

Image Source: (Youtube, 2019)



Pandemic-based McDonald's Advertisement

Image Source: (Rewire, 2023)

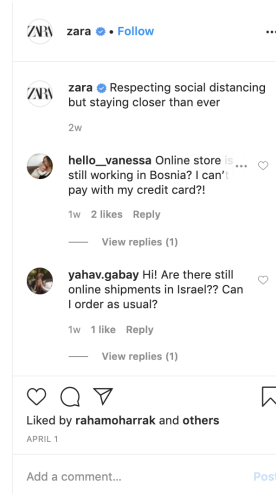


Normal Zara Advertisement

Image Source: (Mowatt, 2019)

# ZARA

RESPECTING SOCIAL DISTANCING



## Pandemic-based Zara Advertisement

Image Source: (Rewire, 2023)



## Normal Volkswagon Advertisement

Image Source: (Wilson, 2021)





Pandemic-based Volkswagen Advertisement

Image Source: (Rewire, 2023)



Normal Coca-Cola Advertisement

Image Source: (maconcocacola.com)



### Pandemic-based Coca-Cola Advertisement

Image Source: (Rewire, 2023)

Research shows a significant increase in desirable consumer behavior when a brand aligns its purpose with the government's social distancing regulations. Specific advertising methods in combination with "the pandemic as a potential influence on consumers' intentions to engage in socially responsible health behaviors" (Özsomer et al., 2022). Results suggest advertising can encourage desirable safety and health behaviors via tactics by highlighting products and services among emerging markets. Successful companies capitalize on new government ordinances and social distance regulations to increase audience awareness and consumer engagement.

Analysis implies social media users' strong impact on the quality of life for young adults amid the Covid-19 pandemic. “Employees started working from home. Increased use of digital information and communication technologies among employees during the pandemic was associated with the flexibility of working from different locations, but with a poorer work-life balance” (Lieres et al., 2022). As a result, social media usage can entourage negative and positive outcomes.

During the pandemic, more people worked and learned remotely. Corporations had employees discuss and converse over Zoom similarly, and so did students from all levels of education. “Zoom has emerged as one of the biggest corporate success stories of this year, as video meetings have become an essential part of work, school, and entertainment for many people during the pandemic. The company has seen a big surge in the use of its free service. It has been pushing to convert many users into paying customers” (Bond, 2020). Zoom, a third party, is a platform that seamlessly connects users face-face via online communication. This was useful during the pandemic because students and employees could not collaborate in person, causing them to find resourceful outlets to solve their everyday problems.

## Methods

I used historical research to recapture the complex nuances, meanings, events, and past ideas that have shaped the present and continue to influence current digital advertising strategies used to increase brand awareness during COVID-19. Historical research is particularly beneficial as it is hard to argue against the value of comparative data over time. It shows the effectiveness of new strategies compared to traditional ones.

I employed correlational research to explore further the statistical relationship between specific digital advertising methods and brands with high levels of consumer awareness and shopper influence. Analyzing how brands such as Peloton and Doordash could boost their popularity using search engine optimization. Correlational research provided me with quantitative data to statistically identify the strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of specific digital advertising strategies across various media platforms. I provide specific examples of key performance indicators and show how successful brands can increase KPIs using innovative social media marketing.

I have utilized qualitative research to explain, understand, and explore subjects' opinions regarding their preferences, brand experiences, and advertising strategies. Examining comments on social media helps acquire information about how different digital advertising strategies affect individuals' brand perceptions. The main purpose of my research is to look at social-media-based advertising across all platforms: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and LinkedIn.

I have also used content analysis to explore how different advertising affects the popularity of a specific brand. In this exploration, I determine how successful companies align their messaging with cultural expectations during my research. This is to understand better the meanings and relationships between certain concepts, themes, and words. My goal is to exemplify how the top companies satisfy the wants and needs of the consumer.

## **Contribution**

The concepts most connected with my topic are social distancing, digital marketing, and human nuances in communication. These categories align with the goal of my thesis to find which strategies are most effective amid a pandemic. I want to study the impact of COVID-19, as social distancing forced brands to re-adjust their marketing efforts to thrive. The project examines my topic so that brands will succeed despite any pandemic crisis. The most important focus is the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies. I want to contribute significantly by discovering how brands should avoid a pandemic.

It is significant to study the impact of COVID-19, as it has affected society on many levels. Understanding the communicative and psychological consequences of social distancing will influence how brands navigate our hyperconnected, digitally-driven world. By exploring selected businesses, a subset of all companies, I will narrow my focus on which digital advertising strategies boosted specific brands. I want to study the top companies (Zoom, DoorDash, and Peloton) with the most engagement and awareness during COVID-19 from March 2020 - August 2022. These brands aligned their messaging with the times, showing consumers that their business model satisfied cultural expectations. I use data to support my findings and conclude why one brand is more successful. COVID-19 damaged our society on a large scale; however, brands were forced to disrupt the traditional advertising world to survive and have taken advertising to a new level.

## **Findings**

In conclusion, Zoom, Peloton, and DoorDash were successful brands amid COVID-19 because their business model easily adjusted towards concurring with new government social distancing regulations. In addition, McDonald's, Zara, Volkswagen, and Coca-Cola aligned their brand and advertising messaging with cultural expectations to positively appeal to their substantial audience. A brand can only successfully navigate and survive a crisis like COVID-19 if an organization's business model and advertising messaging align with cultural and government expectations.

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