

Factors Affecting the Purchase Decision of Customers During Covid-19 Pandemic. A Study on Restaurant Industry of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The current study has determine how word of mouth communication, price of a product and brand image, have influenced customers' purchase decisions within the Pakistani restaurant industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. In other words, the research has examined the impact of word-of-mouth (WOM) communications, brand image, product price on the customers' purchase decisions, especially under crisis situations like the Covid-19 pandemic, where the restaurant businesses of Pakistan were found to face numerous challenges in the form of loss of revenues, loss of jobs, and even closure of businesses.

Design and Methodology: Quantitative methodology was utilized and multiple regression analysis has been used to determine the impact of WOM communications, price, and brand image on the customers' purchase decisions.

Findings: The findings of this research have shown that customers' purchase decisions within the Pakistani restaurant industry were indeed influenced by WOM communications, brand image, and product price.

Implications: The results of this study will help restaurant businesses in Pakistan to survive the challenges that were created by the pandemic, both before and after the lockdowns.

Keywords: Brand Image, Product Price, WOM Communication, Purchase Decision, Covid-19.

1. Introduction

During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns that were imposed in many countries in 2020, a global economic downturn was observed, resulting in a closure of many businesses, unemployment, and a decline under the aggregate demand for many products and services (Feyisa, 2020). The same situation was also observed in Pakistan where the country had to suffer an economic loss of around Rs 2.5 trillion during the fiscal year of 2020 (Kiani, 2020) and a decrease in the gross domestic product (GDP) from US\$ 278.222 billion (that was recorded in 2019) to US\$ 263.687 billion in 2020 (World Bank, 2021; Sareen, 2020).

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Among the other sectors of Pakistan, the restaurant industry of the country also had to experience numerous problems that used to be considered as the second largest industry of the country, having total employment of around 16 percent, and serving more than 180 million customers in the country (Memon, 2016). These problems that the industry had to experience were mainly related to loss of sales from the closure of dine-in services, loss of jobs for many workers like waiters who used to earn daily wages, and even downsizing of many new and small restaurant businesses in the country (Mirza, 2020; Shafi et al., 2020).

However, despite these problems, the online sales and delivery services of the restaurant businesses in Pakistan were noted to increase dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic. This increase in online sales was not only observed in the restaurant industry of Pakistan but also within the overall food and beverage industry (Statista, 2021). This is because, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the sales of the e-commerce market of food and beverages were noted to increase

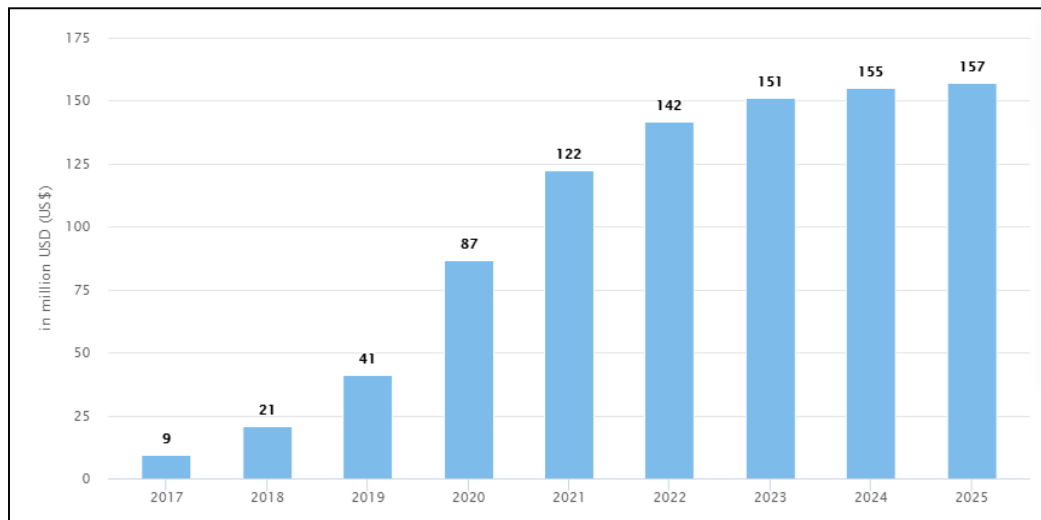


FIGURE 1. Revenue Generated from the Food and Beverage Industry of Pakistan – Source: Statista (2021)

from around US\$ 87 million in 2020 to US\$ 122 million in 2021 (see figure 1). Moreover, it is also expected that in the segment of online food delivery, the revenue will further increase and reach a value of around US\$ 306 million by the end of 2021 (Statista, 2021).

Thus, by considering the above data, one can infer that the increased use of the internet for purchasing food online was one of the main factors that supported the restaurant industry of Pakistan during the tough time that it had to face in the Covid-19 pandemic (Yousafzai, 2021). However,

there is still a need to determine the factors that positively influenced the purchase decision of the customers related to buying their meals online from the restaurants of Pakistan not just during the lockdowns when the Covid-19 cases were rising in the country, but also after the upliftment of these lockdowns in June 2020 with certain standard operating procedures (SOPs) that made it possible for customers to visit some of the restaurants where the dine-in services were reopened again (Zeb et al., 2021).

Upon analyzing the existing literature, it can be inferred that customers' buying decisions are affected by many different factors. For instance, within the studies of Djatmiko, and Pradana (2016) and De and Singh (2017) that were conducted in the smartphone, food and grocery, apparel and clothing industries, the brand image, as well as the price of the product were considered by these authors to play an essential role in positively affecting the buying decisions of the customers. Similarly, in another study by Basri et al. (2016), word of mouth (WOM) communication was also recognized or considered by the authors as a key driver of success for many upscale restaurant businesses in Malaysia. This is because this variable was also found by the authors to positively impact the purchase decision of the customers.

A similar postulation was also made by Roy et al. (2017) in their study who contended that when WOM communications are conducted electronically (i.e., e-WOM), such as in the form of online reviews about a particular product, online shoppers are found to make more informed purchase decisions about that product. This is because they are able to assess the product's characteristics, features, and quality appropriately based on the positive or negative reviews that are given by other customers. Thus, by considering these postulations, the current study has also tried to determine that whether brand image, product price, and WOM communications were also the main factors that positively influenced the purchase decisions of the customers to buy meals from the restaurants of Pakistan, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In other words, the current study has examined the impact of these factors on the purchase decisions of the customers, especially under crisis situations like the Covid-19 pandemic, where the restaurant businesses were found to face numerous challenges that have been already explained above. In this regard, the study has determined that whether these factors associated with the product price, brand image, and WOM communications were also the "*saviours*" for the Pakistani restaurant businesses that helped them to survive during the pandemic and increase their sales both before and after the lockdown situations that were observed in the country.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Image

Upon analyzing the existing literature, one can infer that brand image often plays a crucial role in influencing the purchase decisions of the customers (Djatkiko & Pradana, 2016; Allman et al., 2016). In the study of Safitri (2018), brand image has been described as a set of memories that are developed by customers regarding a certain brand. These memories can either be negative or positive that tend to remain within the minds of the customers for a long time. Moreover, authors like Ramesh et al. (2019) have also stated that the memories that customers develop regarding a particular brand can comprise the perceived benefits that they are able to receive from that brand and it can also include the important attributes of the branded product/service. Likewise, Lahap et al. (2016) have asserted that a brand can be considered as a convenient-unitary image and the image of the brand often influences the buying decision and purchase behavior of the customers.

The reason behind this that has been given by the authors is related to the need to obtain detailed information regarding a certain product in a limited amount of time as customers have become busier than ever and they often look for cues to make informed purchase decisions. This, as a result, motivates them to rely on or consider the brand image as an extrinsic cue for making their purchase decision (Lahap et al., 2016). Thus, by considering these points, the following hypotheses have been proposed to measure the impact of brand image on the purchase decisions of the customers during the Covid-19 pandemic:

Hypothesis 1: Brand image of the restaurant businesses in Pakistan has a significant and positive impact on the purchase decision of the customers under the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.2 Word of Mouth Communication

When it comes to the variable associated with word of mouth (WOM) communication that has been examined under the current research, then one can infer by looking at the article of Huete-Alcocer (2017) that it can be defined as customer-to-customer communications that are made regarding a certain product or service. The term “word-of-mouth” was first coined by Silverman (2011) and several authors like Basri et al. (2016) and Godes (2017) have stated that this form of communication can be considered as a powerful persuasive force, especially within the diffusion of information about a particular product or service.

Besides this, authors like Gvili and Levy (2016) and Huete-Alcocer (2017) have even asserted that e-WOM communication (in comparison to traditional WOM communication) often provides a

significant advantage for companies by allowing them to comprehend the important factors that encourage customers to post and share their opinions online regarding a particular product or service. Moreover, it also enables companies to track and assess the impact of these communications, comments, or messages on other people that these companies were unable to do so in the past while relying on the traditional WOM communication. To measure the impact of WOM communication on the purchase decisions of the customers in the restaurant industry of Pakistan during the Covid-19 pandemic, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Word of mouth communication regarding the restaurant businesses in Pakistan has a significant and positive impact on the purchase decision of the customers under the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.3 Product Price

Within the study of Samuelson (2009) as cited by Djatmiko and Pradana (2016), the price of a product has been defined as a factor that is typically determined when the forces of supply and demand interact with each other within the factor of production. Price can also be defined as the amount of money that is utilized as a tool of exchange in order to acquire a good or service (Wang et al., 2021). According to Kotler and Keller (2016), the perception of price has been considered to impact the purchase decision of the customers regarding a particular product or service significantly. A similar postulation was also made by Muliasari (2020) who also contended that price is often considered as a highly important factor within the purchase decisions of the customers, especially for those products or services that are bought by them frequently. While authors like De and Singh (2017) and Ye and Sun (2016) have stated that when it comes to judging the benefits of a given product (or service), then customers are often found to demonstrate highly rational behavior before paying its price.

Likewise, Hanaysha (2016) has also stated that customers tend to possess high perceptions with regard to what they are willing to pay, which can also be considered as one of the reasons why they forgive poor service more than the poor quality of the food. Thus, it can be expected that customers in most situations will prefer paying a low price as compared to a high price and show a high willingness to purchase high-quality products in comparison to low-quality products (Mathe-Soulek et al., 2016). This point is also highly in line with the postulation that was made by Chenavaz (2017) that some customers will emphasize quality over price, while others (in turn) will show a high preference over price in comparison to quality. Similarly, the hypothesis below has been provided

to measure the impact of product price on the purchase decisions of the customers during the Covid-19 pandemic:

Hypothesis 3: Product price of the restaurant businesses in Pakistan has a significant and positive impact on the purchase decision of the customers under the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the below-provided figure, the conceptual framework for the current study has been presented. This framework was constructed by considering the studies of Basri et al. (2016), Djatmiko and Pradana (2016), and De and Singh (2017) and the impact of the proposed explanatory variables on the explained variable in the current study has been measured within the context of Pakistani restaurant industry under the Covid-19 pandemic.

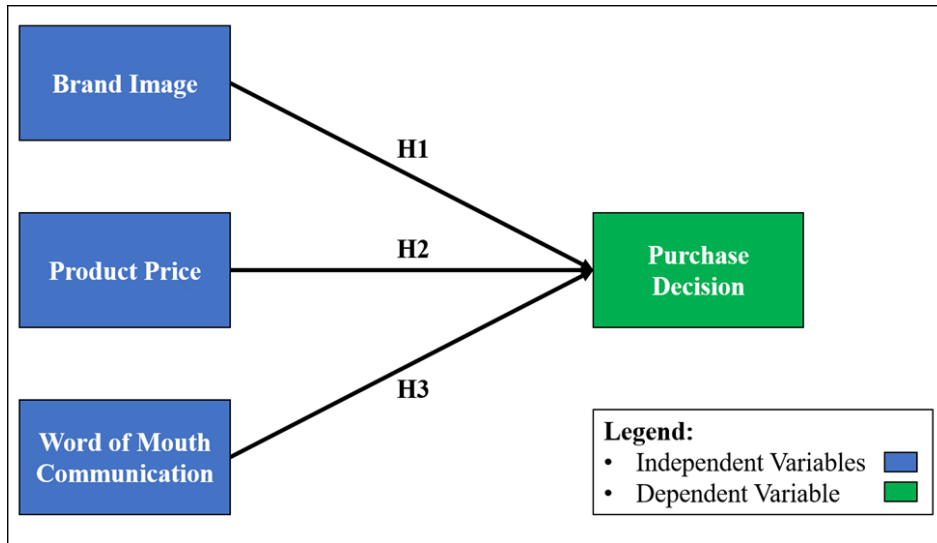


FIGURE 2. Conceptual framework adapted for the current research by considering the studies of Basri et al. (2016), Djatmiko and Pradana (2016), and De and Singh (2017)

3. Methodology

For conducting analyses on the explained (i.e., purchase decision) and explanatory variables (i.e., brand image, product price, and WOM communication) of this research, selecting a quantitative research design has been considered appropriate to provide relevant findings while taking the deductive approach. The reason why a quantitative research design has been chosen for

the current study is primarily linked with its ability in terms of helping the researcher to arrive at objective or accurate findings (based on facts and figures) while examining or analyzing the relationship between the variables of the research (Apuke, 2017). This, as a result, also assists in increasing both the quality and reliability of the findings that are obtained from a given study (Cortina, 2020).

Thus, the same has also been done for the current research where the quantitative research design or methodology has been applied to obtain relevant findings on how WOM communications, price of a product, and brand image have impacted the customers' buying decisions within the Pakistani restaurant industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, another reason why a quantitative research design has been utilized within the current study is linked with its advantage with regard to providing support to the researcher in terms of collecting the data related to the variables of the study from a large sample size easily (Cortina, 2020). This advantage of the quantitative research design has also assisted in increasing the generalizability of the findings that have been obtained while analyzing the relationship between the explained and explanatory variables of this research.

3.1 Sampling Design

Before providing the information on the sampling technique that has been utilized for selecting the research participants to collect primary data about the variables of this study it is important to first highlight the information about the population, sampling frame, and the sample size of this research. Since this research has been conducted within the restaurant industry of Pakistan, the population of this research comprises all those people in Pakistan who visit both the fast-food and fine-dining restaurants of the country.

These people also include those individuals who were noted to purchase their meals from the restaurants of Pakistan both before and after the lockdowns that were imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, all those people who were observed to purchase their meals from the restaurant businesses of Pakistan that are specifically located in the city of Karachi have formed the sampling frame of this research. From this sampling frame, a sample size of 222 research participants has been selected for the current study.

This sample size has been calculated by taking the average of the sample sizes provided in the studies of Basri et al. (2016), Djatmiko and Pradana (2016), and De and Singh (2017) (that have also been used for forming the conceptual framework of the current study) at a 95 percent confidence interval (Cohen, 1988). For instance, in the study of Basri et al. (2016), a sample size of 300 Malay respondents was selected by the authors for conducting their research.

While from the total of 550 respondents, 300 respondents from the food and grocery sector of India were selected by De and Singh (2017) within the sample of their study. Finally, 100 respondents who were located within the south part of Bandung, Indonesia were chosen by Djatmiko and Pradana (2016) in the sample of their research. Thus, the average of these three different sample sizes was taken at a 95 percent confidence interval by considering the study of Cohen (1988) in order to conduct the following calculation to arrive at the sample size for the current study:

$$\text{Sample size} = [(300 + 300 + 100) \div 3] \times 95\%$$

$$\text{Sample Size} = 221.6 \approx 222 \text{ respondents}$$

For selecting these 222 research participants, the convenience sampling technique has been utilized to form the sample of the current research. The reason why this technique has been used for designing the sample of the current study was linked with the need to find the appropriate number of respondents easily and promptly under the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, by using this technique, 222 research participants (i.e., customers who purchase meals from the restaurants in Karachi) have been approached to collect the data for the current study for which an online survey was conducted and Likert-scale questionnaire was used to collect data from these respondents (see appendix A).

3.2 Data Analysis

To measure the internal consistency of the collected primary data, the statistical technique of Cronbach's Alpha analysis has been utilized within this study. In this regard, the Alpha value of this statistical technique has been examined thoroughly in order to determine whether it is equal to or higher than 0.7, which usually indicates that the collected data from the given number of items (or questions) for measuring the variables is internally consistent or reliable (Vaske et al., 2017). In addition to this, frequency analysis has also been provided under this study to provide the details related to the demographic profile of the research participants. Moreover, analysis of the descriptive statistics has also been provided under the current research, primarily to present information on the values associated with mean and standard deviation (George & Mallery, 2016). Furthermore, to analyze the effects of WOM communications, price, and brand image (i.e., explanatory variables) on the purchase decisions of the customers (i.e., explained variable) within the Pakistani restaurant industry during the Covid-19 pandemic, the statistical technique of multiple regression has also been used within this research.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Analysis

Within this section of the report, the findings and results of the quantitative analyses have been presented that were conducted by considering the above research methodology and criteria that have been established to analyze the collected primary data of this study. In this regard, under the current section of this chapter, results of the demographic analysis have been presented for which the age, income, and gender of the research participants have been examined with the help of descriptive statistics and frequency analysis. These results have been shown in the below-provided tables.

TABLE 1. Demographic Analysis – Descriptive Statistics

		Gender	Age	Income
N	Valid	222	222	222
	Missing	0	0	0
	Mean	1.38	2.54	3.73
	Median	1.00	2.00	4.00
	Mode	1	2	5
	Standard Deviation	0.486	0.864	1.284
	Minimum	1	1	1
	Maximum	2	4	5

As can be viewed from table 1, the mean values that have been obtained for the income, age, and gender of the research participants are around 3.73, 2.54, and 1.38, respectively. While the median values for income, age, and gender that have been obtained during the analysis are around 4, 2, and 1, respectively. Similarly, the mode values for these variables as shown in the table are 5, 2, and 1, respectively. Upon analyzing the mode value of income (i.e., 5), it can be inferred that the majority of the research participants had an income of around 50,001 PKR and above. Similarly, the mode value of age (i.e., 2) is indicating that most research participants had an age between the range of 21 to 30 years. While the mode value of gender (i.e., 1) is showing that the majority of the research participants were males. On the other hand, the standard deviation values for income, age, and gender of the research participants are around 1.284, 0.864, and 0.486, respectively. Likewise, the

minimum and maximum values for these demographic variables are also shown in the above table accordingly.

TABLE 2. Gender of the Research Participants – Frequency Analysis

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	138	62.2	62.2	62.2
	Female	84	37.8	37.8	100.0
	Total	222	100	100	

Besides analyzing the statistical dispersion of the demographic variables of the research participants, it is also important to look at these variables individually for which the results of the frequency analyses have been examined. In this regard, the results of the frequency analysis that has been conducted on the gender of the research participants (see table 2) is clearly showing that approximately 62.2 percent of these participants were males. While around 37.8 percent of these research participants were females.

TABLE 3. Age of the Research Participants - Frequency Analysis

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18 to 20 years	19	8.6	8.6	8.6
	21 to 30 years	100	45.0	45.0	53.6
	31 to 40 years	67	30.2	30.2	83.8
	41 years or above	36	16.2	16.2	100.0
	Total	222	100	100	

Similarly, table 3 is showing that most research participants who were approached to collect the data for the current study had an age of around 21 to 30 years (i.e., 45 percent), followed by 31 to 40 years (i.e., 30.2 percent), and 41 years or above (i.e., 16.2 percent). Moreover, only 8.6 percent of the respondents had an age of around 18 to 20 years.

TABLE 4. Income of the Research Participants - Frequency Analysis

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Below 18000 PKR	19	8.6	8.6	8.6
	18001 PKR to 30000 PKR	26	11.7	11.7	20.3
	30001 PKR to 40000 PKR	29	13.1	13.1	33.3
	40001 PKR to 50000	71	32.0	32.0	65.3
	50001 or above	77	34.7	34.7	100.0
	Total	222	100.0	100.0	

Likewise, the above table is clearly highlighting that approximately 34.7 percent of the research participants had an income of around 50,001 PKR or above. While 32 percent of them were found to be earning an income of around 40,001 PKR to 50,000 PKR and 13.1 percent of these participants were also found to be earning around 30,001 PKR to 40,000 PKR. In addition to this, few research participants (i.e., 11.7 percent) during the survey were also observed to have an income of around 18,001 PKR to 30,000 PKR and approximately 8.6 percent of them were earning below 18,000 PKR.

4.2 Reliability Test

After analyzing the demographic profile of the research participants, it is now important to examine the internal consistency of the primary data that has been collected by using the Likert-scale questionnaire for this research. These results or findings of the reliability tests (for measuring internal consistency) have also been shown in the below tables:

TABLE 5. Results of the Cronbach's Alpha Analysis for Brand Image

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.706	05

As can be seen from the above table, the Cronbach's Alpha value that has been obtained for the variable of brand image is around 0.706. By analyzing this value, it can be inferred that the internal

data that has been collected for this variable by using 5 items (i.e., 5 Likert-scale questions) is internally consistent or reliable since this value is approximately equal to 0.7 (Vaske et al., 2017).

TABLE 6. Results of the Cronbach's Alpha Analysis for Product Price

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.671	05

Similarly, results of the Cronbach's Alpha analysis for the variable of Product Price are also indicating that the data for this explanatory variable of the study is also fairly reliable (see table 6). This is because the Alpha value for this variable is also closer to 0.7 (i.e., 0.671) which means that the data that have been collected by using 5 Likert-Scale questions for this variable is also internally consistent.

TABLE 7. Results of the Cronbach's Alpha Analysis for Word of Mouth Communication

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.839	05

Likewise, the Cronbach's alpha value that has been obtained for the explanatory variable of word of mouth communication during the analysis is around 0.839 (see table 7), which is also higher than 0.7. These results again suggest that the data for the variable of WOM communication is also highly reliable.

TABLE 8. Results of the Cronbach's Alpha Analysis for Purchase Decision

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.720	05

In table 8, the Cronbach's Alpha value for the dependent variable of this study (i.e., purchase decision) have also been provided and it can be clearly seen that the Cronbach's Alpha value for this explained variable is also higher than 0.7 (i.e., 0.720). From this result, it can again be inferred that the data for this variable is also reliable or internally consistent. After analyzing the Cronbach's Alpha values for the explanatory and explained variables of this research, it is also important to examine the overall reliability of the entire Likert-scale questionnaire that was used during the

online survey to gather the primary data for this study. These results related to the overall reliability of the Likert-scale questionnaire have also been provided in the below table.

TABLE 9. Reliability Analysis of Likert-Scale Questionnaire

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.898	20

As can be seen from table 9, the Cronbach's Alpha value that has been obtained for all the 20 Likert-scale questions/items that were used to collect the primary data for this study is around 0.898. Since this value is higher than 0.7, it can again be concluded that the data which was collected from the questionnaire during the survey for the explained and explanatory variables of this study is highly reliable.

4.4 Regression Analysis

Before providing the results of the multiple regression analysis under this section of the chapter for examining the impact of WOM communication, product price, and brand image on the purchase decision of the customers, it is important to mention that for conducting this regression analysis, a 5 percent level of significance and a 95 percent confidence interval have been taken into consideration. These results (and their interpretations) have been provided in the below tables:

TABLE 10. Model Summary – Multiple Regression Analysis

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.782 ^a	0.612	0.607	0.289

a. Predictors (Constant). Word of Mouth Communication, Brand Image, Product Price

In the above table, it can be seen that the value of correlation between the explanatory variables (i.e., WOM

communication, product price, and brand image) and explained variable (i.e., purchase decision) of this study is around 0.782. Since this value has a positive sign and it is also higher than 0.5, it can be concluded that there is a strong and a positive correlation between the explained and explanatory

variables of this study. Similarly, the R-square value (i.e., coefficient of determination) in the above table is around 0.612, which means that approximately 61.2 percent variation under the variable of purchase decision has been accounted for by the change within the variables of WOM communication, brand image, and product price. This also means that approximately 38.8 percent variation under the variable of purchase decision has been caused by other variables that are not part of this study. Besides this and as shown in table 10, the value of R-square has also been adjusted at 0.607 to account for the impact of all the statistically significant variables of the study on the explained variable.

TABLE 1. ANOVA – Multiple Regression Analysis

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	28.75	3	9.58	114.58	0.000 ^b
	Residual	18.23	218	0.084		
	Total	46.99	221			

a. D.V: Purchased Decision
 b. Predictors (Constant): Word of Mouth Communication, Brand Image, Product Price

TABLE 2. Coefficients – Multiple Regression Analysis

Model		Coefficients ^a			t	Sig.
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	Constant	0.702	0.195		3.597	0.000
	Brand Image	0.260	0.049	0.265	5.272	0.000
	Product Price	0.159	0.056	0.158	2.854	0.005
		0.413	0.047	0.496	8.751	0.000

a. D.V: Purchased decision

Likewise, in the above-provided table of ANOVA, it can be seen the value of significance is less than 0.05, which means that the entire regression model is statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence interval. In other words, it can be concluded that the entire model has been accepted.

Finally, by using the beta values that are provided in the above table of coefficients, the following regression equation can be generated in order to highlight the relationship between the explained and explanatory variables of this study:

$$Y = 0.702 + 0.260X_1 + 0.159X_2 + 0.413X_3$$

Where:

Y = Purchase Decision

X₁ = Brand Image

X₂ = Product Price

X₃ = WOM Communication

From the above regression equation, several inferences can be made to predict or explain the relationship between the dependent and independent variables of this study. For instance, by looking at the above regression equation, it can be inferred that if the variable of brand image (X1) is increased by a unit, the explained variable of purchase decision (Y) will (ceteris paribus) increase by around 0.260. Similarly, it can also be inferred that if the variable of the product price (X2) is increased by a unit, the variable of purchase decision will (ceteris paribus) increase by around 0.159. Likewise, it can also be concluded from the above regression equation that if the variable of WOM communication (X3) is increased by a unit, the variable of purchase decision will (ceteris paribus) increase by around 0.413.

In addition to this, by looking at table 12, it can also be concluded that all the explanatory variables of this study (i.e., WOM communication, brand image, and product price) are passing the t-test since their t-values are higher than 2 (Keith, 2019). This is because the t-values of brand image, product price, and purchase decision (as shown in the table) are around 5.272, 2.854, and 8.751, respectively. From these results, it can be concluded that all these explanatory variables are statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence interval. Besides this, the p-values of these variables are also less than 0.05, which again means that these explanatory variables are true impactors of the explained variable of purchase decision. Thus, based on these results, it can be concluded that all the hypotheses of this study have been accepted.

5. Conclusion

By considering the results of the quantitative analyses that have been provided in the previous chapter of this research, one can conclude that WOM communications, price of a product, and brand image have played an important role in affecting the buying decisions of the customers positively within the Pakistani restaurant industry under the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, these results are not only validating the findings of the previous studies related to the positive impact of the explanatory variables of this research on the purchase decision (De & Singh, 2017; Basri et al., 2016; Djatmiko & Pradana, 2016), but they are also confirming (to a great extent) that brand image, WOM communication, product price could have helped the restaurants in Pakistan to survive the pandemic.

In other words, these variables could have helped the restaurant businesses in Pakistan to maintain their awareness among their target customers and/or inform the customers about their services during the pandemic. They could have also helped in stabilizing the sales of the restaurant businesses of Pakistan and assisted them to retain and motivate their customers to purchase their meals both online (especially during the lockdowns) as well as by visiting their physical premises, when the

restrictions were gradually uplifted by the government, making it possible for some restaurants to resume their dine-in services.

This is because (and by considering the existing literature), one can infer that there might be a possibility that the Pakistani restaurant businesses would have improved both the intrinsic and extrinsic attributes of their products or brands (Djatkiko & Pradana, 2016), that in turn, would have motivated the customers to purchase their meals during the Covid-19 pandemic. The same goes for providing more consumer benefits (Jeon, 2017), such as in the form of discounts, increased quantity, and quality of the meal, or additional services like free delivery, etc., and improving the brand personality to make a closer connection with the customers during the pandemic (Davies et al., 2018).

This would have helped these restaurants in increasing their sales despite the closure of their dine-in services due to the lockdowns that were imposed throughout the country. Similarly, from the findings of this study, it can also be concluded that the diffusion speed (Huete-Alcocer, 2017), accessibility (Stephen & Lehmann, 2016), as well as the credibility of the information/message (Sharif et al., 2016), that might have been communicated about the restaurants in Pakistan through WOM communications, could have also influenced the purchase decisions of the customers significantly and positively during the Covid-19 pandemic. This might also be the reason behind the positive impact of WOM communication on the purchase decisions of the customers, which was evident in the results of the quantitative analyses of this study.

Again, by considering the existing literature, it can be inferred that there might be a possibility that during the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting increase in internet usage by the Pakistani customers (Statista, 2021; Yousafzai, 2021), the positive WOM communications regarding the restaurant businesses, especially the credibility of the information within these communications (Ismagilova et al., 2020) on the online platforms like websites, blogs, social media, etc., would have played an important role in positively influencing the purchase decisions of the customers.

This, in turn, would have again helped the restaurant businesses to positively affect their customers' buying decisions through the structure or dimensions of their prices (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Kotler & Armstrong, 2014) by making their meals more affordable or fairly priced. Therefore, it can be concluded from the findings of this study that WOM communications, brand image, and price of the product could have indeed helped the Pakistani restaurant businesses to survive the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic successfully.

In other words, it can be concluded that these explanatory variables of the current study could have positively impacted the cognitive, affective, and conative stages of the purchase decisions of the customers (Ali, 2019; Anitha & Mohan, 2020; Su et al., 2019) by motivating them to purchase the meals of the Pakistani restaurants both online and through their dine-in services before and after the upliftment of lockdowns in the country, respectively. This is because the existing literature related to the variables of WOM communications, product price, and brand image has proven that they can positively affect the buying decisions of the customers and it can be concluded (by considering the findings of the current study) that the same would have happened under the Pakistani restaurant industry during the coronavirus pandemic.

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