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The Change of Consumer Behaviour due to Fear Factor during Covid-19 Pandemic: Malawian Shopping Perspective

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Abstract: ***This paper delves into the contemporary theme of shifts in consumer behavior prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research aims to investigate the impact of fear on consumers and examine their reactions to changes in shopping patterns. While there is existing evidence on alterations in consumer behavior during the pandemic, a comprehensive understanding based on consumer opinions and experiences is still lacking. The research methodology involved conducting a survey with a sample of 252 consumers in Blantyre City, Republic of Malawi, offering an original data source for this distinctive study. The study's findings trace individual modifications in consumer behavior during the pandemic, emphasizing shifts related to panic buying. A notable 81% of consumers reported an upsurge in the quantity of goods purchased in 2020-2022, though this form of panic buying markedly decreased in subsequent pandemic years. Results indicate that male consumers were less prone to engaging in panic buying yet expressed heightened concerns about the pandemic's adverse effects on the state's economy compared to their female counterparts. While most consumers were troubled by health threats and associated risks, the research revealed a greater fear for others than for oneself, leading to an increased inclination for solitary shopping. The implications of this study are extensive, offering practical insights for businesses needing to adapt their strategies in the post-pandemic landscape. Moreover, the findings provide a basis for future risk management measures, enabling companies to better prepare and devise flexible responses in the event of similar situations in the future.***

Keywords: Change behaviour, COVID 19 pandemic, Consumer shopping, Fear factor

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the global community is gradually returning to normalcy after enduring several years marked by the COVID-19 pandemic (Veselovská, Závadský and Bartková, 2021). The outbreak of the virus prompted numerous changes in the daily lives of individuals, with the potential to significantly reshape their habits, persisting even as the pandemic subsides (Hesham, Riad, and Sihem, 2021). Among the areas significantly impacted by the pandemic, shopping habits emerged as a key focal point (Sheth, 2020). Consequently, consumer behavior underwent noteworthy transformations (Hesham, Riadh and Sihem, 2021). While various studies have investigated how consumers adapted to alterations in their shopping routines (Li et al., 2020; Adibfar, Gulhare, Srinivasan and Costin, 2022; Cruz-Cárdenas, Zabelina, Guadalupe-Lanas, Palacio-Fierro and Ramos-Galarza, 2021; Mehta, Saxena and Purohit, 2020; Veselovská, 2021; Yang and Chen, 2022), few researchers have delved into the specific aspects of the pandemic influencing consumers and the precise nature of this influence.

This research paper seeks to address this gap in existing literature. Given the expansive nature of the topic concerning the pandemic's influence on consumer behavior changes, this study focuses on a particular facet. Dammeyer (2020) highlighted panic buying during the initial stages of the pandemic, attributing fear as the primary driver behind this phenomenon. However, scant attention has been given to fear as a catalyst for other changes in consumer behavior, and notably, few studies have analyzed its continued impact in the subsequent years of the pandemic. Consequently, the primary objective of this paper is to investigate the influence of fear on consumer behavior throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

II. CONTEXTUALISING THE LITERATURE OF THE STUDY

In the current landscape, the global community is grappling with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rajkumar, 2022). Despite the removal of pandemic-related restrictions in many countries worldwide (Ali, 2022), the enduring impact of the pandemic continues to resonate with entrepreneurs and the general populace alike (Ntontis, 2022).

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The global landscape underwent profound changes following the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in 2020 (Rajkumar, 2022), with one of the most immediate and notable shifts observed in consumer behavior-specifically, alterations in the frequency of shopping visits and the quantity of goods purchased (Anderson, 2020). The abrupt onset of the COVID-19 virus also triggered instances of widespread panic buying, creating imbalances in the supply and demand of goods and posing threats to social stability (Chen et al., 2022).

The manifestation of fear, coupled with the outbreak of COVID-19, gave rise to the phenomenon of panic buying (Alfoqahaa, 2023). According to Ntontis, (2022). panic buying, a shopping behavior stemming from unforeseen events is characterized by irrationality and a lack of control. Importantly, it is not exclusive to individuals deemed psychologically weak (Alfoqahaa, 2022) rather, it can be experienced by those facing extreme duress or confronting unprecedented threats to their existence, both of which encapsulate the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ntontis, 2022). Unforeseen shifts in shopping behavior patterns can have adverse effects on the supply chain, impacting entrepreneurs' capacity to meet the demand for products (Ali, 2022). Thus, avoiding panic buying becomes crucial to prevent disruptions in the supply chain, potential shortages, and the exacerbation of fear among consumers (Thomas and Feng, 2021).

Fear is posited as the primary catalyst for the emergence of panic buying behavior, and it can be disaggregated into distinct dimensions, including the fear of infection, fear of food scarcity, fear of job loss, and fear of crime (Alfoqahaa et al., 2023; Beitelspacher et al., 2012; Aydin et al., 2019). Understanding these dimensions is vital for comprehending the multifaceted nature of fear's influence on consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mehta, Saxena and Purohit, 2020).

Ali et al., (2022) identified internal and external factors, including rumors, government strategies, fear, anxiety, and health security, as significant influences on consumers' panic buying behaviors. Their research linked panic buying to both internal and external consequences affecting all consumers, such as price hikes, product supply shortages, consumer dissatisfaction, and an increase in the utility (benefit) of products, albeit without directly impacting consumers' budgets (Ali et al., 2022). Another study by Rahman et al. (2022) delved into the disruptions experienced by supply chains due to panic buying, resulting in instabilities and multiple disruptions in supply, demand, and capacity during the pandemic.

Donthu and Gustafsson, (2020) major shifts in demand can trigger a chain reaction on the supply side, leading to shortages. When consumers notice dwindling stocks of certain products, they respond by purchasing more, and in extreme cases, hoarding, exacerbating the supply challenges (Adibfar, Gulhare, Srinivasan and Costin, 2022). In normal circumstances, suppliers need time to adjust, but during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, even well-prepared suppliers struggle to react flexibly, perpetuating the crisis (Yang and Chen, 2022). This cycle not only prolongs the issue but also influences consumer fear (DiCrosta, 2021). Many authors attribute fear as a significant factor to media coverage of pandemic-related stories and risk assessments (Rajkumar, 2022; (Chen, 2022; He and Hu, 2022). While mitigating the negative impact of media can contribute to reducing fear, complete elimination is challenging (Oana, 2020).

Beyond panic buying, the fear experienced by consumers led to changes in other habits, such as the frequency of visiting shops or a preference for unaccompanied shopping (Haroon and Rizvi, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented circumstances, and the responses from both sellers and consumers were extreme (Foroudi, Tabaghdehi and Marvi, 2021). Given the possibility of similar extreme situations in the future, analyzing the changes that occurred during the pandemic becomes imperative for better preparation and flexible responses (Chen et al., 2022).

III. RESEARCH DESIGN / METHODOLOGY

To comprehensively analyze the influences of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behavior from early 2020 through the following two years, a survey was conducted between October 2022 and April 2023. The study involved a sample of 252 consumers from Blantyre, Malawi. The age distribution within the sample is illustrated in Table 1. Participants aged 29 years or younger constituted 26.98% of the sample, while those between 30 and 41 years old represented 25.79%. Consumers aged 42 to 54 accounted for 20.63%, and those between 55 and 66 comprised 19.84%. The older consumer group (67 years and above) constituted 6.74% of the sample. The representativeness of the sample was assessed based on the age criterion using the Pearson Chi-squared test.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the sample based on gender, Age, and Education

Sample characteristics			Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male		84	33.3
	Female		168	66.7
Age group of respondents	18-29 years		68	26.98
	30-41 years		65	25.79
	42-54 years		52	20.63
	55-66 years		50	19.84
	67 years and above		17	6.74
Highest level of qualification of participants	Secondary school	Male	7	2.78
		Female	3	1.19
	College Diploma	Male	47	18.65
		Female	61	24.21
	University degree	Male	30	11.9
		Female	104	41.27

Source: Own elaboration

The sample file comprised 33.3% male consumers who either were the primary shoppers for their households or lived alone. However, the majority of survey participants were female (66.7%), as they were primarily responsible for the main shopping duties within their families. Additionally, consumers were asked to provide additional characteristics, including household income, employment status, and education level. Table 1 outlines the distribution of the sample file based on the education and gender of consumers.

Within the sample, the predominant group was women with higher education qualifications, constituting 41.27%. Conversely, more than half of the male participants in the sample file had completed secondary education, accounting for 55.96%. This diversity in education levels and gender representation within the sample file allows for a comprehensive exploration of consumer behavior changes during the COVID-19 pandemic across different demographic groups.

The utilization of this sample file served as a valuable means to investigate consumer opinions regarding the pandemic and elucidate the transformations in their shopping behaviors induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected from this diverse group of consumers contributed to constructing a nuanced and intricate depiction of how the pandemic instigated changes in the business environment, as perceived by consumers. By analyzing their perspectives, this research aimed to offer insights into the multifaceted ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic influenced and reshaped consumer behaviors.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The survey results distinctly illustrate shifts in consumers' opinions and behaviors over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. An initial observation during the early days of the outbreak revealed a surge in the purchase of everyday consumption products, with 82% of consumers reporting such an increase in 2020. However, this form of panic buying experienced a significant decline in subsequent years. A majority of consumers even reduced the quantity of goods purchased in 2021 and 2022. Figure 1 presents the corresponding data categorized by gender. The results unequivocally demonstrate that widespread panic buying did not persist into the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, male consumers exhibited a lower likelihood of altering the quantity of goods purchased for themselves and/or their families. These findings underscore the considerable impact of fear as a determinant of consumer behavior during the pandemic.

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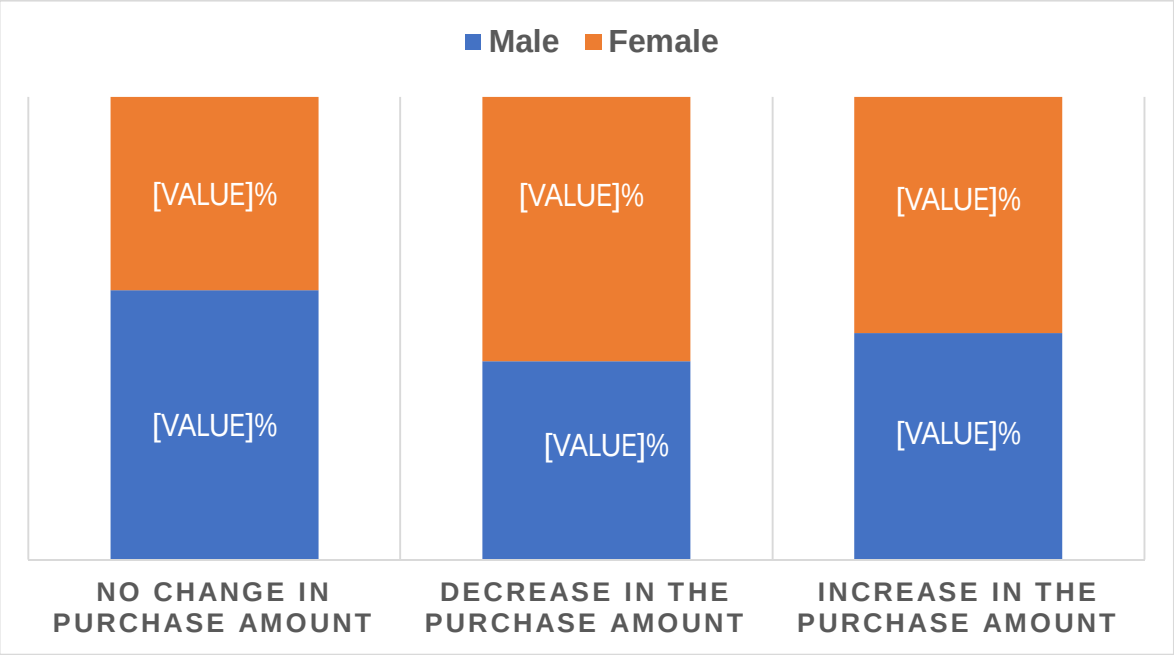
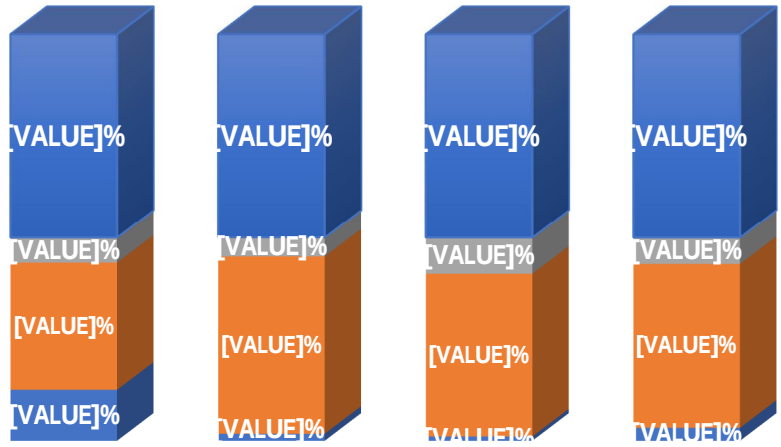


Figure 1 Variations of goods purchased by consumers during COVID 19 Pandemic

Source: Own presentation

The findings underscore the significant role of fear as a determinant of consumer behavior. However, it is essential to consider another major factor that can contextualize these findings. The government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Blantyre, Malawi, was notably stringent, involving several major lockdowns and additional restrictions, such as a ban on traveling outside the local region (Duda-Chodak, 2020). These measures directly impacted consumers' ability to visit shops as they were accustomed to. Figure 2 presents data correlating the frequency of visiting shops with changes in the quantity of goods purchased during the pandemic.



	Increase in the amount of purchase goods	Increase in the amount of purchase goods	There is no change in the amount	Total
Total	15.87	46.43	37.7	100
No change in frequency of visits	1.98	4.37	6.75	13.1
Less frequent visits to shops	9.92	40.48	30.16	80.56
More frequent visists to shops	3.97	1.59	0.79	6.35

Figure 2 Frequency visits at the shops and amount of goods bought during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Own presentation

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The table below depicts the changes in amount of goods and visist during the pandemic.

Table 2: Changes in frequency shops visits and changes in amount of goods purchased during COVID-19 pandemic

Number of consumers	More frequent visits to shops	Less frequent visits to shops	No change in frequency of visits	Total
Increase in the amount of purchase goods	10 (3,97%)	25 (9,92%)	5 (1,98%)	38 (15,87%)
Increase in the amount of purchase goods	4 (1,59%)	102 (40,48%)	11 (4,37%)	117 (46,43%)
No change in the amount	2 (0,79%)	76 (30,16%)	17 (6,75%)	95 (37,7%)
Total	16 (6,35%)	203 (80,56%)	33 (13,1%)	252 (100%)

Source**:** Own presentation

Since it has been established that consumers significantly altered their habits and tendencies during the pandemic, it becomes valuable to explore the extent to which fear played a role. Consumers were asked to provide data specifically designed for this purpose by indicating their agreement or disagreement with several statements (Table 2). The data revealed that nearly half of the consumers increased the importance of stockpiling. Only 34.12% of consumers believed that they made purchase decisions independently of information about the pandemic situation, with up to a quarter of consumers being unaware that they took this information into account in their decisions.

Fear also had an impact on social behaviors, with nearly a third of consumers showing a preference for unaccompanied shopping during the pandemic. The research further delved into consumers' perception of their fear regarding potential negative phenomena caused by the pandemic. Firstly, the level of consumers' fear of harming their own health was examined, revealing that nearly 40% expressed a strong response to this statement, with an additional 16.67% expressing agreement. Interestingly, consumers were more concerned about the health of others, as 67.06% agreed, while only 14.29% disagreed with the related statement.

Another significant worry among consumers was the risk of job loss, though this fear was less pronounced than health concerns, with only 21.43% expressing worry about being fired during the time of COVID-19. The pandemic and its associated restrictions also had economic consequences, significantly impacting the state's economy. Almost half of consumers (46.82%) expressed concerns about the economy and its future development. It is noteworthy that approximately 20% of consumers could not express their opinion on the selected statements. Investigating the reasons behind this, whether due to subconscious changes or consumers not fully recognizing the fundamental changes in their lives caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, could be a worthwhile endeavor in the future.

Table 3 Influence of fear during COVID 19 pandemic

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
During the Covid 19 pandemic, I felt worried about losing my job.	101 (40.08%)	44 (17.46%)	53 (21.03%)	23 (9.13%)	31 (12.30%)	252 (100%)
During the COVID 19 pandemic, I felt concerned about the health of others	22 (8.73%)	14 (5.56%)	47 (18.65%)	57 (22.62%)	112 (44.44%)	252 (100%)
Information about the COVID 19 situations influenced me when choosing the type of the product, quantity, , store, time of purchase.	46 (18.25%)	40 (15.87%)	62 (24.60%)	48 (19.05%)	56 (22.22%)	252 (100%)
During the COVID 19 pandemic, I felt worried about our country's economy	47 (18.65%)	27 (10.71%)	60 (23.81%)	74 (29.44%)	69 (27.38%)	252 (100%)
During the COVID 19 pandemic, I bought goods for stock.	47 (18.65%)	32 (12.70%)	56 (22.22%)	54 (21.43%)	63 (25.00%)	252 (100%)

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I felt worried about my health during the COVID 19 pandemic.	27 (10.71%)	33 (13.10%)	51 (20.24%)	42 (16.67%)	99 (39.29%)	252 (100%)
To greater extent, I prefer unaccompanied shopping during COVID- 19 pandemic.	48 (19.05%)	38 (15.08%)	50 (19.84%)	37 (14.68%)	79 (31.35%)	252 (100%)

Source: Own presentation

The provided data on consumers' fears were further scrutinized by correlating them with socio-economic characteristics. The analysis revealed that men were more inclined to express concerns about the negative impact of the pandemic on the state's economy compared to women. Additionally, this fear was more pronounced among consumers with higher education levels, and this particular segment also exhibited a heightened interest in information about the pandemic situation.

Conversely, older individuals showed disagreement with the statement indicating a lower interest in socializing, suggesting that this demographic had a greater need for social contact during the pandemic. This finding is noteworthy, considering that older consumers are typically more vulnerable to negative health risks during a pandemic. Interestingly, it was the younger consumers who engaged in stockpiling goods to a greater extent, presenting a unique dimension to their behavior during this period.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research underscore the significant impact of fear as a major influencer of consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consumers, aware of the risks associated with the virus outbreak, altered their behavior in response to the perceived threat. Similar conclusions were drawn by Li, (2021) in a comparable study conducted in China, with supporting evidence from research in other countries (Ntontis et al., 2022; Alfoqahaa, 2022). The study reveals that fear can manifest differently among individuals, as demonstrated by the varying responses observed in male consumers, who appeared more resilient to panic buying but were equally affected by health threats.

Contributions from Duda-Chodak et al. (2020) and Foroudi et al. (2021) corroborate the significant changes in the frequency of visiting shops during the pandemic. Consumption rates markedly increased post-COVID-19 outbreak (Veselovská et al., 2021; Anderson et al., 2020), a trend also attributed to fear. The psychological factors influencing consumer behavior, once downplayed, gained prominence due to the pandemic, with various risks, particularly fear, playing a pivotal role (Cetina et al., 2012; Di Crosta et al., 2021).

The theoretical implications of this research extend to businesses, policymakers, and academics. It contributes to the development of a framework illuminating how psychological factors shape the behavior of 21st-century consumers facing radical and unexpected events. The study highlights how behavioral economics principles apply during crises, offering insights into decision-making under uncertainty and risk. Understanding the psychological drivers of consumer behavior during a pandemic holds significance for the field of consumer psychology.

The study's results elucidate the shifts in consumer behavior at different stages of fear exposure, including panic buying, stockpiling, and a preference for unaccompanied shopping. The findings also delve into how distinct consumer segments reacted under the influence of fear created by the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic has reshaped social norms and cultural practices, this research contributes theoretical insights to sociological and anthropological perspectives. Moreover, the study of consumer adaptation and resilience in the face of adversity contributes to the broader field of resilience research, serving as a foundational resource for future investigations into this multifaceted topic.

Mitigating the impact of fear during the pandemic requires concerted efforts from central governments and businesses. From a governmental perspective, managing public information dissemination becomes crucial to prevent the spread of false or fear-inducing information. By controlling the narrative, governments can contribute significantly to lowering fear levels among consumers, subsequently reducing panic buying and other adverse changes in consumer behavior. Additionally, promoting a sense of safety in shops has proven effective, emphasizing the need for businesses to prioritize and communicate safety measures. Implementing tailored safety measures according to customer needs can be a practical approach, contributing to the overall well-being of consumers.

The findings of this research have practical implications for businesses, highlighting the newfound importance of safety considerations in shops. Understanding how consumer expectations and preferences have evolved can guide businesses in enhancing customer experiences and building long-term loyalty. The research also points to opportunities for product and service innovation, especially in health-related sectors.

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Moreover, post-pandemic consumers exhibit a heightened sense of social responsibility, community care, and environmental consciousness. Recognizing and incorporating these factors into business strategies can contribute to success. Businesses are adapting their marketing campaigns and supply chains to align with changing consumer values. The shift towards sustainability, perceived risk, and consumer trust is becoming integral to the success equation. This research provides valuable insights for businesses and policymakers seeking to navigate the challenges of the post-pandemic era.

The practical implications extend to risk management measures, enabling companies to better prepare for future emergencies. Businesses can use the research findings to design flexible responses, ensuring adaptability in the face of unforeseen circumstances. Adapting supply chains, incorporating more local suppliers, and understanding the evolving needs of consumers are crucial steps for future resilience.

Beyond practical implications, the research contributes to theoretical discussions in various academic disciplines. It sheds light on human behavior, societal change, and the role of technology during times of crisis. The study of consumer behavior changes during the COVID-19 pandemic has broader implications for understanding how societies respond to unprecedented events and adapt to new norms.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH STUDIES

While the research findings offer valuable insights for companies seeking to understand their post-pandemic customers, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The primary limitation lies in the narrow focus of the study, as the data collection was confined to Blantyre, Malawi. Consequently, there might be subtle variations in consumer opinions when compared to other countries, and generalizing the findings globally may be a challenge.

To address this limitation and enhance the robustness of the research, a natural extension would involve comparing the obtained results with data from other surveys or conducting international surveys with a similar focus. A cross-cultural analysis could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how consumer behavior changes during the pandemic vary across different regions, cultures, and socio-economic contexts.

Furthermore, the exploration of additional factors influencing consumer behavior during and after the pandemic could be a fruitful avenue for further research. This may include delving into the role of digital technology, e-commerce, and online platforms in shaping consumer choices and preferences. Understanding how technological advancements intersect with psychological factors can offer a more nuanced view of the evolving landscape of consumer behavior.

Additionally, investigating the long-term effects of the pandemic on consumer behavior and how these changes persist beyond the immediate post-pandemic period could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding. Exploring how societal and cultural norms continue to evolve in the aftermath of the pandemic can provide valuable insights for businesses and policymakers.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while the current research sheds light on important aspects of consumer behavior changes in a specific context, future studies should aim to broaden the scope, compare findings across diverse populations, and delve into the multifaceted factors influencing consumer choices in a rapidly changing global landscape.

VIII. ETHICS STATEMENT

This article complies with research ethics.

IX. FUNDING

The author of this academic research article declare that there was no funding sources for this research, nor any competing interest.

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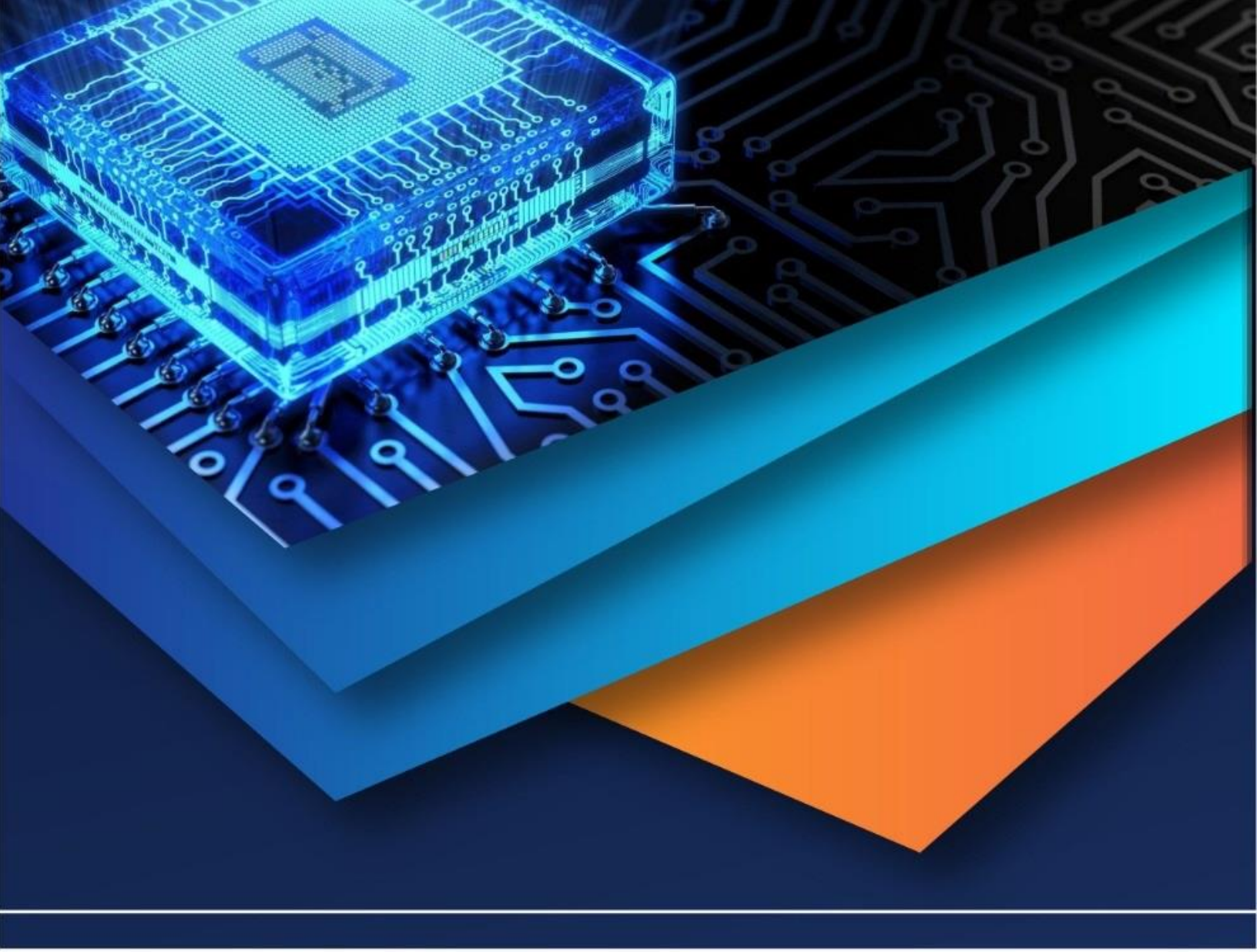

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